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# Printed **POISON**

OCTOBER 1933

in this issue,  
**ALL-NEW** stories from:

Brian Cain

Jack Draper

Ron Fortier

Cavan Scott

Martin Scribbler

Richard Siegel

and...

more **DIABOLICAL CHILLS** in  
Part 4 of Henry Ponopscotch's...  
**"the DEMON-HAUNTED CITY"**

POISON

**PLEASE SUBMIT!**  
**PRINTED POISON NEEDS YOUR WORK!**

*Printed Poison* is a sporadically published, pulp-inspired webzine. We are seeking fiction and art submissions.

Our guidelines are as follows:

**Fiction**

- We are looking for pulp-inspired, two-fisted fiction. Mystery, adventure, horror, science fiction, and western are all welcome.
- Not sure what qualifies as pulp? Check out the Lester Dent article on page 8. Not all *Printed Poison* stories must conform to this master plot, but it captures some of the soul of what we're after here.
- Try to write your stories as though you are living in the 1930s. (You can set your stories later than that, but then they'll be science fiction!) Don't think of it as a restriction, think of it as a writing challenge!
- We are really keen on publishing serials just so long as you guarantee you can finish them.
- Writing quality should be good but it doesn't have to be genius. This is pulp-inspired so we're shooting for Dent, not frickin' Joyce. **Please spell-check!**
- Word count: 1,000 – 10,000 words, but we can accommodate longer and smaller pieces.
- Send all fiction submissions or proposals to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

**Art**

- We are looking for black-and-white interior artwork of all sorts. 1930's era and pulp-inspired, of course.
- We prefer drawings to photos. Comics-style is perfect.
- Currently, the next few cover images are sorted, but we'd like to see new ideas.
- Send art submissions and/or queries to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

All these guidelines are just that: *guidelines*. Don't be afraid to ignore them.

**PRINTED POISON IS:**

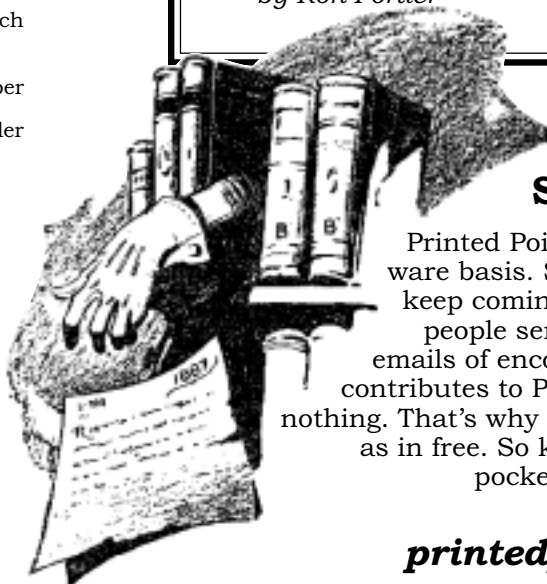
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# Printed POISON

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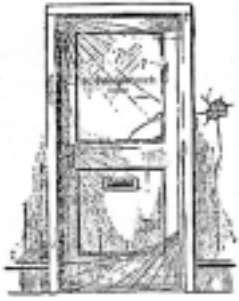
## Table of Contents

Our Contributors .....	3
from the Editor's Desk .....	3
the Demon-Haunted City .....	4
<i>by Henry Ponopscotch</i>	
Hell Flight: A Jack Slade Adventure .....	9
<i>By Cavan Scott</i>	
First Person Singular:	
"I Shot Down King Kong" .....	20
<i>by Richard Siegel</i>	
The Kirby Conclusion .....	26
<i>by Jack Draper</i>	
Together They Die .....	29
<i>by Brian Cain</i>	
Captain Zack Brass versus	
the Space Vampires .....	38
<i>by Martin Scribbler</i>	
Lady Arcane: the Mistress of Magic .....	44
<i>by Ron Fortier</i>	

## Slip us a message!

*Printed Poison* is published on a write-ware basis. Simply put, this means we'll keep coming out with issues as long as people send us stories to publish and emails of encouragement. Everybody who contributes to *Printed Poison* is doing so for nothing. That's why the zine is so cheap. Cheap, as in free. So keep that filthy lucre in your pockets and send us some emails ...filthy or otherwise!

**printedpoison@yahoo.com**



## from the Editor's Desk

Ahhh, Halloween! Every pulp editor's favorite time of year because it means we don't have to hold back on the horror. In keeping with the spirit of the season, this issue you'll have to face demons, giant apes, and space vampires! Not bad, eh? We were thinking about giving away Printed Poison night-lights instead of t-shirts this time around.

And speaking of t-shirts, our first ever contest wasn't exactly a rousing success, but our only entrant did manage to win the prize. A big congratulations and thank you to Richard Siegel. He is indeed a gentleman and a scholar. Not to mention a crackerjack pulpateer.

Keep an eye out for our big Xmas DOUBLE DOSE of Printed Poison. We'll be decking it out with all the trappings of a normal zine, and then adding to it an entire section in honor of a certain pulp hero you all know and probably love. We're talking turkey *and* stuffing here, kids.

See you then,

Henry Ponopscotch

*Poisoner-at-Large*



## Our Contributors

**Katey Ashcraft**, the buckaroo-banzai of menial, low-paying jobs, has worked as an illustrator, book binder, loan underwriter, secretary, waitress, and at a few other jobs best left unmentioned. Currently living in Missouri, she is working on a BFA in studio art. She likes seafood. Hates onions. Her favorite color is brown.

After serving for six years as a mercenary in Biafra and Rhodesia, **Brian Cain** decided to settle in the United States, write detective stories, chew bubble gum, and pursue world peace and a date with Kirsten Dunst. He lives in a fortified compound in California, but he's not embarrassed by it.

**Thomas Floyd** is an ex-soldier, adventurer, demolitions man, roustabout, roughneck, and mechanic, who has settled for a simpler life on the Great Plains. Now only interested in producing good illustrations that harken back to the days when magazine racks were a feast for a young artist's eye, when heroes and adventure flooded magazines, the airwaves, and film. He also occupies the webspace at [www.thomasfloyd.com](http://www.thomasfloyd.com) with his art.

**Ron Fortier**, with over twenty-five years as a professional writer of comics and science fiction novels, this New Hampshire native is now turning his creative focus to becoming an Internet-Pulpster. His prose (and comics) can be seen at ([www.SupernaturalCrime.com](http://www.SupernaturalCrime.com)) and ([www.ModernPulp.com](http://www.ModernPulp.com)). Lady Arcane is a new character created exclusively for Printed Poison!

**Cavan Scott** is a professional magazine editor residing in the green and pleasant land of Great Britain. He has also script-written three official audio plays based on the long-running BBC science fiction series, Doctor Who, and is currently writing a full-cast Judge Dredd production to be released in 2004. His pet hamster is called Frank.

**Richard Siegel's** illustrations and comics have appeared in such periodicals as The New York Times Book Review, American Artist, Marvel Comics and various books packaged by PushPin Studios. As a Director of Photography, he and his associates at MarsFilm, Limited have shot over 40 indie features, shorts, documentaries, music videos and more. Most recently, his first horror film, "Flesh for the Beast" won the Best Cinematography Award at the 2003 NYC Horror Film Festival. Although a fan of genre fiction, "First Person Singular" is Richard's first contribution to Printed Posion.

**Henry Ponopscotch, Jack Draper and Martin Scribbler** are the pulpateer patrol that put together Printed Poison. Legend has it, they're the same person— some Canadian guy named Paul Dechéne. Don't you believe it! Hank, Jack and Marty are rough-and-tumble, knock-around guys who take no guff and write like panthers. When they get together, watch out! It's like a bomb going off!





# the Demon-Haunted City

by Henry Ponopscotch

*As Jack Grey races across the rooftops of New York City,  
Professor Deadmoor must battle a mysterious foe!*

## **CHAPTER FOUR: KIDS THESE DAYS**

Out of ammo again, not that it mattered. Shooting back while playing the wild goose in a wild goose chase wasn't sporting. And besides, it was taking all his concentration to shake this last pursuer. Jack Grey was an escape artist and as such, he loved putting his skills to the test whenever possible. Freeing himself from straight jackets,

circumventing handcuffs, opening safes from the inside, or losing a tail, the tricks differed but they flexed common muscles. You had to be wily and nimble, and some brute strength and stamina didn't hurt either.

All things being equal, he especially enjoyed being hunted like this; it afforded him a chance to get outside and scramble over rooftops and up and down the sides of buildings. All things weren't equal though. This time around, he would much

rather be confronting head-on whoever it was who'd arranged the murder of Manhattan Max, and not running around trying to get away from one minion out of a seemingly countless hoard.

No, this particular chase was starting to get tiresome, even though it had begun almost too easily. He'd managed to escape Max's rooming house without being spotted. But as his goal was to lead the bad guys away from the Professor and the Emperor's Own, he'd actually had to go back and escape all over again, this time more conspicuously.

The next step in his plan was to run the mugs a few miles off in the wrong direction, lose them, and then head back to the theatre in case he was needed there. Easy peasy. Should have taken fifteen minutes. But as his planned fifteen minute diversion was now stretching into forty-five, he was starting to get the sinking feeling that whoever Max had pissed off was able to employ better than your average muscle.

And how many of them were there? By his last count there were the two mugs he'd left cowering on the fire escape back at Max's, then there were the five gorillas with the tommyguns who were tooling about in the Studebaker, their driver, four more who'd fled the second the cop sirens got near, and then the three who'd decided to try and run him down. Two of them couldn't jump very far, and he'd lost them a block back. And then there was this guy, the persistent one. Once he got Jack's scent there was just no shaking him.

So let's see, that's two plus five plus one plus four plus three. And then there were the nine that Max had dispatched. It added up to a small army.

And whoever this last kid was, he was good. This next trick would do him in for sure, though.

Jack raced across a flat stretch. It'd been a while since his pursuer had taken a pot shot at him, but just in case he weaved in between a series of peaked skylights. Then he leaped over a little step onto another building with a steeply slanted roof and scrambled up the incline. He chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw his tail, two buildings off but gaining. He wasn't worried though as he knew this neighborhood well. The brownstone he was climbing had an attic apartment with a window box that shot out perpendicular to the main beam. In the crook where the two sections of the roof intersected there was a narrow strip of exposed sheet metal that water ran down. Even though it hadn't rained yet, the air was starting to cool so it'd be slick with dew.

He reached the top, vaulted over, and sure enough, landed on one foot on the damp tin surface and, with his other foot stuck out in front of him and his hands to the side to steady his de-

scent, he slid downward at breakneck pace. He aimed his free heel low, and when it slammed into the eaves, he pushed outward with both legs and sprang across the gap towards the next building.

He flew through the air—two yards, three yards, four yards, more—swinging his legs forward and his torso down, curling up as he travelled. He landed on his toes on the flat top of the adjacent roof, a full story lower than the one he'd just leapt from, and rolled forward with the momentum. He sprang to his feet and ran on, grinning to himself as he went. That jump always made him happy and without that extra burst of speed from the slide, it just couldn't be made. You'd come up a few feet short and have a nasty fall onto some clothes lines. Probably not fatal but certainly painful. There's no way anyone could follow him across that gap. Not unless he was...

Jack Grey slowed to a jog, looked back over his shoulder once again and saw his pursuer vault over the summit of the brownstone, land on the strip of sheet metal and perform the exact same stunt.

Now Jack was angry. And he could hazard a guess at who was following him—not who the kid was specifically, but who'd trained him at least. To make certain, he'd have to resort to tactics he generally preferred to avoid.

He ran diagonally across this roof and made the short jump to the next one, all the while letting his pursuer gain a little ground. For his next trick to work, he'd need a few moments to prepare out of sight before he was overtaken, but not so long that his tail would have time to get suspicious. It was all about momentum.

When he reached the edge of the building, he dropped off the side without looking. But he knew what to expect and before his feet touched down on the fire escape landing he had drawn a thin piece of flexible metal from inside his jacket. With this, and the expert speed of a cat burglar, he turned, jimmied the latch on a window, crawled into the living room of an apartment and waited. Only a second passed, and then he watched as his pursuer touched down outside. The kid was probably expecting to chase Jack down the staircase to the alley below. Instead, he was grabbed by the knees and pulled through the window. His head clanged hard against the rail of the fire escape as he pitched over.

Panting and exhausted, Jack laid the stunned form of his pursuer out on the rug. He'd guessed right, the kid was young. To be that tenacious you'd have to be either youthful and hungry or aged and disciplined—and the latter would be too smart to try and run down Jack Grey. What's more, even a cursory glance at the kid suggested

there was more to him than met the eye.

Just then, from a nearby door, a squat old man stepped nervously. He was brandishing a small footstool. "Wh-who's there?" he said meekly as he flipped on a light. The sight that greeted him was an odd one: Jack Grey, dressed in his priestly black, pinning a ruffian to the ground and searching through his clothes.

"F-father!" said the old man.

Jack held up his hand and spoke: "Do you have a phone?"

The old man nodded.

"Good. Call the police. I caught this burglar trying to rob you."

The old man nodded again, clearly shocked and frightened but unwilling to be suspicious of a man of the cloth. He slunk back into his bedroom.

The ruffian was starting to come to and Jack looked down at him. From the cheap suit the kid wore, he had already pulled an automatic with several rounds still left in it, three throwing knives, crampons, and several yards of very fine rope attached on one end to a collapsable grappling hook. On top of all this, he'd discovered that the hood's trousers were oversized to conceal the climbing harness he was wearing.

"You are with the Roof Runners' League," he said, brandishing the grappling hook in the kid's face.

"Hunh?" was the reply.

"Don't play dumb. The League doesn't take in morons. And they don't work cheap. Who hired you?"

"Like I'm going to tell you, old man."

"I figured as much..." Jack's words trailed off as he heard a car pull up outside. It was too soon to be the cops and that didn't bode well.

He stood up and stepped to the front of the apartment, dragging the roof runner along by his collar.

On the street below he saw the Studebaker. From it, the five gorillas with the tommyguns were emerging. And from up on the roof, he heard the sound of running feet.

"So... I didn't lose your friends. They're just slower than you are."

The hood started to laugh.

Jack looked down at him and levelled a finger at his face. "You know, you guys are really starting to tick me off!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Gears turned beneath the floor of the theatre. Iron cables pulled concealed levers. And from each of the exits could be heard the sound of slamming doors and latches sliding into place. The Emperor's Own was sealing itself up so that no matter what happened next, at least this grisly visaged

adversary would not escape.

Professor Deadmoor raised his weapons and prepared to launch himself at the man who had brought about the death of Manhattan Max, but then he heard it: the low sound of animal growls. From out of the shadows came three giant mastiffs, their mouths frothing, their eyes alight with an unnatural fury. Two came from the back of the theatre and would take a moment to get to him, but one had already snuck up along one side and was launching itself onto the stage.

"Baal! Mammon! Hecubus!" shouted the robed figure to his dogs. "Eat him!"

Attack dogs? This was wrong. They were far too mundane and the shadows they cast were merely canine-shaped. Professor Deadmoor's eyes scanned around the theatre, but the monstrous figures he'd been expecting seemed to have disappeared, and that did not bode well. He would have to be careful. But he had a more immediate concern to deal with. The first of the dogs was on the stage with him already and launching itself across the floorboards to attack. The Professor stepped backward quickly, facing the advancing beast and keeping a sword ready. When he reached center stage, though, he plunged his off-hand weapon into a crack in the floor and jabbed a concealed switch. Behind him, a wooden cabinet sprang up from a compartment under the stage. It was just large enough to accommodate a single standing person and the door on the front of it was open. Professor Deadmoor stepped backward and disappeared into it. The dog leaped after him, but instead of impacting with either its prey or the back of the cabinet, it simply seemed vanish.

Professor Deadmoor, one of his weapons now sheathed, stepped from behind the cabinet and slammed the door shut, snapped a finger and the entire structure collapsed in on itself. There was no dog to be seen. "I'll deal with you later," he muttered under his breath. He knew that when this was over, Rose would chastise him for being a soft touch, but he just couldn't bring himself to kill the animals no matter how vicious they seemed to be.

"I presume you will return Hecubus to me in tact when the show is over, Deadmoor?" he heard up from the audience. He looked out and saw that the robed figure was sitting now, his feet up on the seat in front of him. *Shouldn't you be passing out from those injuries*, the Professor thought to himself.

And then it happened. From behind, he felt what must have been claws tear into him. They raked across back, ripping open his jacket and slicing into his skin. He stumbled forward, spinning as he went and sweeping with his sword at this sur-

prise assailant. But his weapon sliced through empty air. Whatever had attacked him was gone.

"You missed, Deadmoor!" his audience of one shouted. Then from his left he heard the other two dogs touch down on the stage.

He regained his footing and leapt toward stageleft where he knew another series of concealed controls lay. He landed and jabbed his toe three times on secret pressure plates and quietly started counting down as he marched to meet the attacking animals.

The dog in the lead in mid-charge stumbled, its forelegs having snagged on an invisible tripwire. It landed muzzle first and slid forward. Professor Deadmoor tossed his coat over it, and as the fabric settled on the stage, the animal beneath it disappeared. The final dog then leaped at his throat and—three, two, one—the Professor dropped to his knees as a sandbag suspended from a rope pendulummed out from stage left, swung right over his head and smacked into the animal hard, sending it careering and yelping across the stage.

"Bravo!" cheered the figure.

And then it happened again. From behind him, Professor Deadmoor felt a long slender point jab itself into his side. He danced away, slicing with his sword at where he deduced his attacker must have stood, but he saw nothing there. The stage was empty except for himself and the stunned dog.

Then again from behind him, he felt a claw drag against his scalp. It had only time enough to deliver a shallow scrape before he somersaulted up-stage away from it. He landed on his toes and stood. Scanned the wings for any sign of this invisible attacker, and then again he felt something dig into his leg from behind. He leapt forward, sweeping his blade behind him.

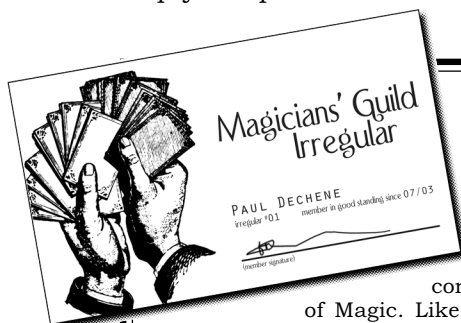
Meanwhile, the final dog had shaken off the last of the blow.

"Get him, Mammon!"

It struggled to its feet, and with a snarl, it launched itself at the Professor, even more furious now.

Professor Deadmoor raced back to the series of control panels at stageleft, his eyes on the dog as he moved, and his sword outstretched behind him to ward off another surprise attack. With his other hand, he reached around to his back, up under his vest, and from a scabbard strapped there he drew his other weapon. At first, it was little more than a dagger, just a foot and a half long, but when he snapped it in the direction of the dog, it, with a snick, expanded into a rapier of over four feet from tip to pommel.

The Professor stopped. Watched the animal charge for a moment, and then, weary of the showmanship of the vanishes he'd performed on the other beasts, he stomped his heel on the ground



## Join the Magicians' Guild Irregulars!



### Guild Membership Quiz

Answers to these questions can be found through careful reading of the first three chapters of "Demon-Haunted City."

1. What is Professor Deadmoor's first name?
2. What are the names of Professor Deadmoor's two assistants?
3. Where was Swami Jim born?
4. What band does Randall Diamond sing with?
5. What is Jack Grey's current occupation?
6. What was the *real* date of Manhattan Max's Mermaid Theatre show in 1920?
7. Which Magicians' Guild member died December 31st, 1899?

Send answers to [printedpoison@yahoo.com](mailto:printedpoison@yahoo.com).



of Magic. Like the Regular members, they strive to uphold the Code of the Magicians' Guild and maintain the Principles of Modern Conjuring in the face of Injustice, Ignorance and Inhumanity. Unlike the regular members, the mortality rate for the Irregulars is slightly lower!

### Join and you will...

- ☛ be the first to learn about new developments at *Printed Poison*, the official magazine of the Magicians' Guild!
- ☛ receive a personalized membership card! Front shows your name and individual Irregular Member Number! On reverse, the Eight Principles of Conjuring!
- ☛ receive a fold-and-assemble Mini-Magic Dictionary so you can brush up on important conjuring lingo!

### Show you've got what it takes!

Take the Guild Membership Quiz (at right)! Send your answers to [printedpoison@yahoo.com](mailto:printedpoison@yahoo.com) along with your name (as you want it to appear on your card), email address, and your home city. If you score high enough, you will become a full-fledged Magicians' Guild Irregular, entitled to all the rights and privileges that go with such an honored title!

and two large trapdoors swung open beneath the dog. It disappeared into a giant pit and the doors sprang back up and snapped closed.

Three mastiffs down.

“Bravo! Bravo!” the figure was standing now, applauding the performance. “Magnificent dog work! But what do you have left Deadmoor? Do you know?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Professor Deadmoor was bleeding.

Real blood.

The stab wounds in his side and his calf were shallow and probably nothing to worry about, but the cuts in his back were deep he knew, and they stung profoundly. He didn’t want to take another hit like that.

He stood in centre stage, his blades outstretched. He swung them in precise arcs as he scanned the corners, looking for concealed intruders.

He felt something tear at his ankle and immediately he leapt to the side while jabbing a sword point downward to connect with... nothing. And while he’d moved fast, the damage had been done. The attack, he guessed, had been aimed at his achilles but had somehow missed its mark and only dug into the bottom of his calf. It had been deep, though, and he had to struggle to avoid limping. He was walking in a wide circle now, his eyes darting everywhere. Out into the seats, into the wings, up into the racks of lights and the catwalks, but he could see nothing. And as he swung his blades in the air, they touched nothing.

From the audience he could hear his audience cheering him on: “Dance Deadmoor! Dance!”

He felt something slice at his shoulder, and he turned, danced backward, swinging his blade wildly. The injury was minor, but again, there had been nothing there that could have delivered the blow.

His back was to the audience now and he was looking upstage. He could see the shadow of himself that the floor lights were casting up against the back curtain. It loomed there, moving back and forth across the stage, the thin shadows of the swords waving absurdly about. There was something about seeing his form inflated up like that, that made him feel even more pathetic and helpless as he danced about, swinging at air.

And then he thought he saw it.

He’d swung his sword in a broad arc over his head and the shadow of its point had just skirted the edge of the circle of light the lamps were casting. And at that, moment a part of the darkness seemed to shy away from the sharpness of his shadow.

Professor Deadmoor smiled. He understood.

He moved quickly backward, downstage, swinging his swords and watching where they cast their shadows. And when he was near the orchestra pit, he stopped and manipulated a series of pedals with his heel.

Dozens of lamps came alive, flooding the stage with light. And as they did, his unseen foes were exposed and weakened. The Professor leapt into the centre of the stage, and from that point, a single powerful spot was bringing his shadow into sharp focus on the expanse of curtain at the back.

Upon it too, were a series of monstrous shapes, seven in total, made of teeth and horns and insect extremities. They appeared as shadows themselves, but they were cast up there by nothing. And in the abyssal logic that made their existence possible, the lamps made them vulnerable—they were pinned down.

The Professor turned to address his audience. “Shadow demons? You couldn’t have summoned something with powers that were a little less literal?” As he spoke he thrust his rapiers, their shadows moving precisely on the curtain behind him. As a sword point passed through each misshapen figure, it writhed about as though pierced, shuddered in silent agony as he slid his shadow blade away, and then dissipated into nothingness. “Their weakness was so obvious, afterall.”

The robed figure was now standing in the aisle, his charred face screwed up into a look of anger. He was holding aloft a large, black automatic pistol. “You’d be surprised,” he said, barely containing his fury, “by how few people ever cotton on to it.”

“So, you would try to gun me down now then?”

The figure nodded.

“Then we are back to where we started,” said the Professor. “I believe my line is something like... only a fool would try to attack a magician in his own theatre.”

“You know, I’m just the first,” he said defiantly.

“I suspected as much.”

At that moment, the door to the lobby swung open and Jack Grey strode into the theatre, a Tommygun held at the ready.

Professor Deadmoor looked up a moment.

And the robed figure turned his gun on himself. ☹

**This ends the story “Demon-Haunted City.” The adventures of the Magicians’ Guild will continue in the next issue of Printed Poison in Chapter One of a new spell-binding serial entitled “The Perils of Modern Conjuring.”**





# Hell Flight: A Jack Slade Adventure

By Cavan Scott

You never quite get over how much blood is actually in the body of a man. I mean, you know up here, in your head, that there's pints of the stuff slopping around in your veins, but it's only when you see it spread out like spilt wine that you see the bigger picture.

The other thing that you can never prepare yourself for is how detached you become from horror once you've faced bloodthirsty werewolves. A few months ago the pulpy remains of Mr Cheeseman would have sent me scurrying for the puke bucket, but now here I was at the scene of a horrendous death happily munching a peanut butter sandwich. How times change, eh? Something about that Stone business must have flicked a switch in my head. I mean, once you've stared into the festering jaws of oblivion, nothing can shake you.

Nuts. Who am I trying to kid anyway? No bum is gonna read this diary. The truth is I took one peek at Cheeseman's remains and displayed to everyone in the church just what I had eaten for breakfast. Ten minutes later, when Sergeant Hambling walked into the Rectory, he found me with my head still lodged between my knees.

"How you feeling?" he asked, with the air of a guy who didn't care one way or the other.

"Just dandy officer," I slurred, "Couldn't be better."

"Well, that's just swell." He sat down heavily on the chair opposite me, "and perhaps this'll teach you why it's not a good idea for rookie reporters to wander into... incidents such as these. The contents of your stomach may not agree with what your eyes see."

If I wasn't so worried about a repeat performance of comedy retching I would have taken him to task about the rookie dig. I wasn't some green-behind-the-ears-hack. I was a been-around-the-block-and-lived-to-tell-the-tale hack. OK, I was also a certified coward but hey, this level of yellow belly took years of practice. You didn't become the Star Reporter on the Bathampton Echo overnight you know. Oh no, it took at least three days. That and making the Editor java every morning. But Hambling wouldn't have known that. He was new to town so I should cut him some slack.

"Look Mr..." the stocky cop continued.

"Spencer." I replied, after all it was my name. "Patrick Spencer."

"Mr Spencer, I realise this is a big story to you, after all a town like Bathampton doesn't get suicide cases every day but..."

Suddenly my head snapped up, despite the oncoming wave of nausea.

"Suicide? Is that the official police position?"

"What else could it be, Mr Spencer. Harold Cheeseman threw himself off the top of the pulpit and smashed his own brains out on the communion rail. It's as simple as that."

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck bristling.

"As simple as that?" I repeated, surprising myself that I could become so incensed by such a casual disregard of a member of my community (while also being a little shocked that I was now calling Bathampton 'my community') "Did Mr Cheeseman... did Harold leave a note saying why he did this?"

Hambling shook his head, letting out a telltale sigh.

"No Mr Spencer. There was no note."

"And so there's nothing to explain why the man who has kept this chapel so impeccably spick and span for the last 30 years would suddenly scatter all the hymnbooks from the stand, knock over the lectern and, if I believe the officer at the door, crawl all over the alter cloth with muddy boots?"

Hambling fixed me with a fierce stare.

"No, there wasn't."

"Nothing to explain why the jolliest, warmest man in this town should decide to open his skull rather than go home to the wife he had loved for 50-odd years?"

I don't know what Hambling was thinking, but I was scaring myself. I almost sounding like a real investigative journalist. This could ruin my reputation.

The cop just sat there in silence, letting me rant.

"Could it be Sergeant, that perhaps the reason that there was no note was that Harold didn't take his own life, but was chased through the church, knocking into this and that in his flight, ran up to the pulpit and was pushed to his death."

Hell, this sounded good. Perhaps I should have been some kind of court lawyer instead of getting into the papers. Pity my argument was about to

be squashed flat.

"You mean that Mr Cheeseman was killed?"

My chest puffed out with pride. Imagine, the 'rookie' seeing the true crime when the lawman blundered about in the dark. I could write a novel about this one.

"OK, maybe you're right." Continued Hambling, scratching his greying beard. "Maybe this is homicide? Maybe, the killer broke into the church, attacked Mr Cheeseman, he ran and they chased after him before tossing him from the highest point in the building."

"Yes, exactly." I said triumphantly.

"And then they left their motiveless murder victim breathing his last, without touching a single thing in the church and made sure they locked the doors behind them."

"So that the body wouldn't be found until the next day." I added helpfully.

"Yeah, you know you might have something here," Hambling said thoughtfully, "although one thing puzzles me."

I peered at him wondering if once again I would have to do all the detective work around here.

"I would just like to know how they managed to bolt the church doors from the inside as they left. If you could tell me that, I guess we'll crack the case."

I'm sure he didn't have to look so smug as I was escorted out of the church.

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I threw the last of the bourbon down my neck.

"And they really believe it was suicide?"

I nodded, pausing to wonder if I should light another cigarette. I'd been smoking a lot less these days, mainly due to Julie's hatred of the old weed. Hey, I always knew this girl would be good for me.

Ever since I'd moved back home to Bathampton I'd been blown away with the skirt that worked at the drug store. What a honey. A blonde-bomb-



**"Harold Cheeseman threw himself off the top of the pulpit and smashed his own brains out on the communion rail. It's as simple as that."**

shell with curves that would have a monk throwing off the habit. At first our relationship - hell, imagine Spence in a relationship - was nothing more than the odd polite smile and a longing, if slightly drunken, gaze across the bar at Al's. But, the gig with the Stone had given me five minutes of notoriety and obviously elevated me above the rank of bum in Julie's eyes. She'd bought me a drink one night and followed it over to my booth. A few hours later we were pitching sweet woo back at her pad. Now, don't be thinking that this was some loose broad I was messing with. She told me afterwards that she'd never moved so quick with a guy, but she felt electricity pass between us when we finally talked. Who was I to complain?

"Yeah, that palooka of a new cop hasn't got a clue. Cheeseman wouldn't smash his own noodle in, everyone knows that,"

"Well, Hambling is new in town."

I couldn't hold back the smile.

"You always see the good in folk don't you Jules?"

Her teeth flashed brilliant white.

"Well someone had to with you, Spence."

I screwed my face up in mock indignation.

"Okay sister, do you fancy one more smell from the barrel or shall we blow this joint for a little hey hey."

Julie's perfectly styled eyebrow arched.

"You know I have absolutely no idea what you're on about when you talk like that..."

I grinned like a idiot.

"... but if the rough translation involves us getting hot and bothered, then lets go."

I loved this girl.

Throwing down some jack to pick up the tab we headed towards the door, my eyes never leaving the sway of Julie's hips.

If we had left just a few seconds earlier we would have missed him, but as it was the doors crashed open and I found myself knocked to the floor. Angrily I looked up at the sap that had sent me flying, my jaw dropping when I took in his mush.

Pastor Smith scabbled to his feet as every eye in the bar widened. No wonder. It's not every day that our man of the cloth is seen without his cloth. And yet here he was, standing in a Gin Mill in nothing more than his birthday suit. Whatever would the Women's Institute say?

But somehow that wasn't the craziest part of this set-up. As I pulled myself up and shrugged off my jacket to drape over the old man's shoulders he spun me around and stared into my face with wide, yellowing eyes. A thin stream of drool ran from his slack mouth to the stubble of his chin and when he spoke, the broken hiss of his voice froze my guts.

"Demons." He cried out, spinning around to ad-

dress everyone at Al's, as if he were standing in his pulpit on Sunday morning. "They've come for me, to pluck out my eyes and sup on my soul. Demons!"

His knees cracked as he fell to the floor, arms outstretched to the throng that ogled at him from every corner of the bar.

"They're here for you too. Run while you can, for this town is descending into hell."

\*\*\*\*\*

I'd sent Julie home before trying to draw a few quotes from the Quack that was called to take the Pastor away. The poor kid was shook up and as soon as I'd got my job done, I'd swing by and see if she was ok.

Things took longer than I thought though. The crazy old fool didn't exactly go quietly, screaming, shouting and clawing at the orderlies who tried to lug him into the wagon. This was too weird. Had he taken something? Nah, the holy man would never get himself jingle-brained. It had to be something else.

When I finally nailed the Doc he was as baffled as I was. Pastor Smith had never shown any signs of mental instability; in fact he was the most rational man the Doctor had ever known. What then could cause him to strip himself and nip down to the bar for a cold one? The Doc just shook his head and muttered something about tests needing to be carried out before jumping into the wagon with his patient who was still yelling about the dark lords even though he'd been stuck with a tranquilizer.

I half considered hopping in there myself, when an iron hand crashed down upon my shoulder.

"Isn't it past your bed-time, Mr Spencer?"

I turned to see Sergeant Hambling glaring at me, like a bulldog that has just spotted a juicy bone.

Shrugging off his paw I replied. 'Not me Sergeant. I'm a regular night owl.'

"Then may I suggest you fly back to your roost, Barnie. There's nothing to see here, and no story to write."

"Yeah." I nodded, "Yeah, you're probably right. After all, the guardian of our eternal souls has just exposed himself to most of the town in the middle of what could be described as a mental breakdown. What boring copy that would make. I mean, demons? Who wants to hear about them in this day and age?"

Hambling sneered, ignoring the sarcasm and looking me up and down, turned back to the street. "Good to see you're seeing sense, Spencer."

My eyes bore into the back of his uniform as he stalked away.

Rubbing my eyes, I felt my body sag. This had

turned out to be a long day and I longed for my sack. I glanced at my watch. Julie would be asleep now, though I thought I'd better check. But there was no answer as I stood outside her apartment and I didn't want to wake her so I trudged back to my own pad. All the time, the images of Harold Cheeseman's caved-in skull and Smith's manic ranting played on my mind. You couldn't tell me that the two incidents weren't connected. The Pastor and the church caretaker, one mad and one dead, both on one day. But what did it mean?

Reaching home, I leant forward to slip the key in the lock, but stepped back as the door swung open of its own accord. It was off the latch. God-dammit, had some one broken in. Or was someone still in there.

Knowing that there was no way I could run to Hambling, I crept into the hallway, stopping only to pick up the baseball bat that stood guard by the front door. Hey, even in sleepy Bathampton, you couldn't be too careful. Cursing the stairs for creaking I inched up towards my bedroom, staring at the light that spilled across the carpet under the crack in the door.

Pausing only to catch my breath and will my heart to stop racing, I brandished the bat above my head and reached for the handle. It was now or never.

I yanked the door open and swung into the room, yelling at the top of my voice,

"What the hell do you think you're..."

My war cry faded away. The room was empty. Nothing was disturbed, except for the bedside lamp that had been left on to illuminate... what was that? Some freak had left a calling card on my pillow. Was this some kind of joke?

Checking over my shoulder that there was no one hiding behind the door, I dropped the bat onto the bed and picked up the card.

Two words were scrawled above a local number with no signature or any pleasantries. It simply read. "Call me."

Flipping the card over, I took in the name printed at the centre in block capitals. Just when I thought today couldn't get any weirder.

It read,

"JACK SLADE - PRETERNATURAL INVESTIGATOR".

\*\*\*\*\*

So old scar-face was back in town, eh? Things must be more desperate than I thought. I splashed the icy water from the basin over my face. I had to keep sharp, even after a night denied of sleep. First I called into the office and informed Warwick's secretary that I was out chasing a story and then I sat staring at the card. Did I really want this? I

mean, last time I'd run into this lug I'd only just escaped with my intestines still safe in my body. And what was he doing back? It had to be about yesterday's events. Perhaps someone in that shadowy organisation he worked for had heard about our little tragedy. But how had they heard so fast? Well, if I wanted answers I guessed there was only one-way to do it. Before I could change my mind, I snatched up the handset and dialled the number.

There were two sharp rings before it was picked up, and his voice growled over the wire. The goon didn't sound any friendlier.

"Spencer?"

"Yeah, it's me. I must have been out when you popped around last night. Sorry to miss you."

"Meet me at the corner of Parfitt."

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks for asking. How are you?"

"10 o'clock. Don't be late."

The line went dead.

"Bye then."

I slammed the blower back on to the cradle.

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"I tried to call round," I explained, holding out the flowers, "but there was no answer."

Julie looked fine, if still a little shaken. She took the bunch, her full lips pulling into a smile.

"Thank you Patrick. They're beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as the person I'm giving them to."

The compliment brought a blush to her cheeks.

"You're so sweet. However did I cope without you before?"

I shrugged.

"Aw, you were just lucky I guess."

"I better get these in water and you'd better shoot, or else I'll get in trouble."

I glanced up at the clock. It was 9.50

"Yeah, you're right. I've got people to do, things to see."

Blowing Jules a kiss, I grabbed my hat and headed out to the street.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was the coldest October I'd ever known. The air cut through my coat like a rack of knives. Even the cigarette wasn't warming me. As I trudged along Parfitt it soon became clear that Slade was no-where to be seen. I was in no mood to be playing this creep's little games. I reached the corner and, dropping the butt to the sidewalk, ground it into the floor with my heel.

"Filthy habit."

The voice made me jump a mile in the air. I spun around and there he was, as large as life. Same black flogger, same hooded eyes, same scar carved across his button.

We stood there for a second, sizing each other up. I was damned sure I wasn't going to speak first.

"So, been back in the neighbourhood long?" I asked, speaking first.

"Just passing," came the rumbling reply.

"Well, this is swell. Nice we had the chance to meet up and chat, but I gotta..."

"Come with me."

Slade's order was short and sweet alright. Without another word he turned, coat flapping melodramatically in the breeze and stalked down the street.

"Oh, I see. You jump and I asked 'How high?' eh? Just like old times."

I waited until he had nearly disappeared around the corner before, cursing, chased after him like some obedient pup. Sometimes I hated myself.

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The drizzle had set in by the time we'd reached the nut house. Slade didn't even seem to have noticed but I was soaked to the skin. Not that the rain was the thing that was giving me the willies. Lidster Asylum was enough to drive any man insane. Blackened walls shone slick as the lightning flashed ominously in the sky. It was almost as if the joker had planned all this, to scare what little wits were left in me.

We trudged in, our damp shoes squelching on the marble floor. With a grunt Slade instructed me to stay put as he swept over to the gorgon of a receptionist and flashed some impressive looking ID. The old hag clutched for the phone and squawked down it, before glancing up to my hulking associate and informing him that Mr Lidster had cleared us for unlimited access. Slade didn't even say thank-you but marched over to the stairwell, indicating with the slightest of waves over his shoulder that I was to follow. As I passed I tried to avoid the piercing gaze of the receptionist's cold green eyes, but couldn't help but flinch at the sound of her nails scratching at the dry skin of her forearm.

Eventually, after traipsing through seemingly endless dank corridors, we reached where-ever it was that Slade was taking me. Without warning he stopped, causing me nearly to crash into him, and tried the heavy door. It didn't budge. With a mumble of irritation he pulled a set of the weirdest keys I've ever seen and tried every one in the lock until it turned. The door swung open with a screech and he stalked towards the pathetic figure sitting on a stool beneath the barred window, staring hopelessly up at the moon. As a stream of slobber ran down his chin, I realised just who I was looking at and my heart welled with pity.

"Pastor Smith," Slade barked, "Can you hear me?"

I grabbed Slade's arm and tried to pull him back. It was like trying to yank over a hundred year old tree.

"Hey, Jack. How's about leaving the poor Clyde online. He's obviously sick."

Slade didn't budge.

"When was the last time you went to church, Spencer?" he asked.

I stumbled for a reply.

"Well, it's been a while, you know, I've been kinda busy. I guess it was Christmas."

"Heathen." Slade said, and I couldn't tell if he was joking. This guy didn't exactly seem a bible basher. "But whatever the state of your soul, I can guarantee that if you had visited the house of God just one day ago, Pastor Smith here would have seemed the sanest man alive."

I looked at the poor excuse for a man rocking on his stool and shook my head.

"Then what happened to him?"

Slade reached out and with a surprisingly gentle touch grasped the Pastor's head and swivelled it so he could stare directly into the guy's cloudy, blood-shot eyes.

"He saw something. He saw something that snapped his mind in two. Tell me, what did you see?"

Smith just gazed blindly back. I wasn't quick enough to stop Slade suddenly drawing back his hand and slapping the Pastor around the face.

"You son of a bitc..."

"What did you see Smith?"

When his voice came, it was the most unearthly sound I had ever heard.

"The daughters of Satan," Smith croaked, "Handmaidens of Hellfire."

I shook my head sadly.

"The poor old Goose's lost it."

"I don't think so, kid. Who were they, Father? Who were they?"

Smith's eyes bulged in his colourless face.

"The witches," he spluttered, "The witches of Lucifer."

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I hadn't expected Slade to offer to buy me a drink, and despite it being a little early to hit the hard stuff, I wasn't likely to look this scarred gift-horse in the mouth.

The glass of liquor slammed down in front of me. I raised an eyebrow at the sight of Slade's own poison - a glass of milk. Was this guy for real?

"Don't drink on the job, eh?" I smirked. He ignored the gibe.

"Know of any covens in Bathampton, Spencer?"



he asked, tasting the white liquid. I couldn't suppress a snort of laughter.

"Don't tell me you're falling for all this hubble, bubble, toil and trouble business?"

"Wasn't that long ago you were scoffing at werewolves. How're the scars healing?"

My hand instinctively moved to my chest.

"Very funny. But come on, these are just the ravings of a deranged old man."

"But what sent him deranged? Ask yourself that."

"And I suppose you think it's all down to Satan's little helpers here on earth?"

Slade didn't answer but sipped thoughtfully at his milk, never letting his eyes move from my face. We sat in silence for a second before he asked a second, and somewhat more mundane question.

"You have a library here?"

The sudden change of track caused me to falter.

"Err, yeah, on the high-street, but..."

"Come on." He ordered, his chair scraping across the floor as he shot up.

"We're leaving?" I asked, bearing hiding my sarcasm before I shot back the remnants of my drink.

The gloom of the day hadn't improved as we tore along the high street. As we passed the drug store we passed Julie who was taking a rack of papers in from the rain.

"Patrick," she started as her eyes met mine and I was pleased to see a smile spreading over her face. "Where are you heading?"

"Hey babe," I replied, "We're off to the library apparently."

"We?" Julie glanced at the fast disappearing figure of Slade, "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, he's no pal of mine, let me assure you." I said, grinning before a gruff command to get a move on caused both our heads to snap around.

"Charming," Julie commented.

"You don't know the half of it. I'll explain later. Dinner? Tonight?"

"Why not?" Julie smiled. "Come round to mine at eight. I'll see what I can whip up."

"Sounds good," I said, winking. "But, I better get after him. There could be a killer story in this one."

Julie squeezed my arm affectionately before I chased after Slade who had already stomped into the library.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I don't think I like your attitude, young man."

Miss Batt, the ancient librarian, thrust her hawkish nose in the air and glared at Slade, her arms crossed over her wizened bosom.

"Well, ma'am." Slade replied. "I'm sorry if I upset you but this is official business. I need to see

those records."

"Adding bullying to your list of honorable qualities?" I quipped as I appeared by his side. I was rewarded by a soul-chilling stare.

"If you've finished chatting up the local bims, I suggest you close your yap and let me get to work here."

"Hey, that's no bim, that's my... oh, don't sweat it."

What was the point of arguing with the guy?

"Good. Now, use your boyish charms and get this... lady here to show us the library records, will you?"

Miss Batt made the sound of a choking hen.

"Skipped the lesson on diplomacy, eh big fella?" I asked before turning my attention to the affronted librarian. "I'm so sorry Miss Batt. Please excuse my friend. He was raised by swine so he's not the most pleasant of men."

I ignored Slade's look.

"But it would really help us if we could look at those records of your for... whatever it is we're looking for."

"Well, I'm not supposed to..."

"Of course, if you could help us here I'm sure I could write a piece urging the good people of Bathampton to donate money to your fund to buy the new encyclopaedias. It is a worthy cause after all."

Miss Batt's eyes darted from me to Slade, then back to me again.

"I guess it won't hurt. As you asked nicely."

The last addition was directed firmly at Slade with as much venom as the old dear could muster.

"Thank you Miss Batt."

The librarian handed us over a heavy register and Slade hungrily snatched it from her hands. Flicking through the entries for the last week, his chunky figure stopped as he ran down the last page but one.

"There we are." He cried triumphantly.

"There we are where?" I asked.

His voice dropped as he read the entry.

"[i]Spells and dark charms: Summerisle's Journal of Hexes and Witchery.[/i]"

"Sounds great. Nice bit of light reading there."

"It was taken out two weeks ago by a Miss Winters."

"And she hasn't brought it back," threw in Miss Batt as she went back to stamping books for no apparent reason. "Mary'll get a hefty fine this time."

"You know her, Miss Batt?" I asked.

"Of course I do, young man," she snapped. "Mary Winters works up at the asylum. Lives on Whicker Avenue."

The old woman jumped as Slade slammed the

book shut and thrust it back into her hands. Without a bye or leave, he turned and was out of the library before anyone could say another word. Smiling at the librarian, who was going a funny colour in rage, I made my apologies and followed him out.

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"And so you just broke into that poor woman's house?"

Julie wasn't trying to hide her disgust.

"Well, *I* didn't exactly break in," I squirmed, "Slade did that. I sort-of stood and watched."

"Patrick Spencer. You should be ashamed of yourself."

I put the knife back down by my plate. I'd lost my appetite and by the look of it, any chance of fun tonight.

"I am, babe. Truly, I am. I don't know what it is about Slade, he just sort of tells me what to do..."

"... and you roll over like a good little dog?" I visibly winced. "I thought you had more backbone than that."

"Now, honey..."

"Don't you honey me. I can't believe that a man of mine..."

Inwardly I brightened. This was the closest she'd ever got to talking about our relationship.

"...would terrorise little old ladies in broad daylight and raid their homes."

My heart sank once again.

"But, as I tried to explain, it..."

"... wasn't you, it was Slade." She was getting a little too good at finishing my sentences. "Well, did he tell you to come around here tonight and eat at my table?"

"Of course he didn't."

"What? You mean that you've done something off your own back. Well, what a guy!"

"Look, honey, I don't understand why you've got so upset about all this? It's not as if you know these women. And the story..."

"And the story... and the story..." she snapped, "Is that all you can say? The reason that I am so upset about all this, Patrick, is that you are obviously not the man I thought you were. The others warned me about you..."

The others? What others?

"... but no, I thought that you were more than some cheap boozehound who couldn't make it in the big city,"

"Hey, that's low, Julie."

"But I guess I was wrong. I think you should leave."

"Leave?" This was getting out of hand. "Don't you think that you're blowing this out of proportion?"

"No, I don't." Julie was almost shaking with anger now, her hand pressed against her temple. "You should go. I don't want to see you right now, and I can feel one of my head aches coming on."

"Fine." I stood up, knocking the plates on the table loudly as I rose and made a grab for my hat. "I don't fancy staying here much anyway. If you ask me, you're as crazy as Pastor Smith!"

Her napkin just missed me as it whizzed past my ear.

\*\*\*\*\*

I lit another gasper as I walked down the steps from her apartment. What the hell had that been about? It was a good job I hadn't mentioned how Slade had emerged from Winter's house looking like the cat that had got the mouse, let alone the cream. In his hand he was carrying a jam-jar full of dark, grey leaves and yellow flowers. He thrust it in my face and with a grin that would make a skeleton shiver simply uttered one word; "Henbane!"

And with that he'd headed off, leaving me standing by Miss Winter's open door.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I'd yelled after him.

"Go and see your girlfriend," came the reply. "I'll call on you tomorrow morning."

Oh joy!

The world had officially gone mad. Or perhaps I'd finally lost my mind and everyone else was sane. First there was old man Cheeseman's so-called suicide, then Pastor Smith and now Julie had lost it. What was it with Slade and all hell breaking loose?

Ah, well. There was nothing I could do tonight. Flicking the butt of the smoke into the gutter, I began the long, cold walk home.

I hadn't been moving long when I got one of those feelings, like I was being watched, you know? At first I tried to ignore it, but soon all the hairs on my head were standing to attention. I stopped and looked around. Nothing. The rain had given in to fog, but the street was empty. At least, I hoped it was.

Perhaps, it was Slade, creeping me out again. I called out, but no answer came. Yeah, good one Spencer, like a stalker would call back. Cursing myself for reading one too many dime magazines, I continued on my way.

But still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't alone. My pace quickened and my heart nearly burst from my chest as I saw something dart out of the corner of my eye. I span and slipped on the wet street. As I hit the deck, a black cat skipped out of the mist. I laughed as the mog brushed up against me. Some investigative journalist. Spooked

by a mangy cat. Groaning, I rose, rubbing my throbbing fanny.

The cast skipped off into the dark.

Limping slightly, I continued on my way until I heard...

"Paaatricks... Paaaaaaatricks."

My blood froze. Who the hell was that? I yelled out again, but still there was no answer, except for the eerie call from the mist.

"Paaaaatricks."

"Who's there?" I called, spinning in all directions. The fog had become so thick now, I could hardly see my hand if I reached out in front of my face.

The fist hit me hand in the gut and I doubled over. Gasping for breath I re-opened my eyes, but nothing was there. Whack! Another hand, this time open smacked me over the back of the head. Where was this coming from?

"Naughty boy, Patrick. Now, we'll have to punish you."

"Who's there?"

Cold fingers jabbed me in my ribs. I whipped around to grab the wrist but my hand sailed through the mist.

"We're very angry with you."

Something slithered over my foot. I jumped, lost my footing again and crashed to the floor. As my heart hammered, I gingerly touched my eye where my head had hit the curb. Blood smeared over my fingers. I felt tiny feet scuttle over my left hand. Whatever it was had run up my sleeve and was crawling up my arm. With a shout I ripped off my coat and stared in horror at the tiny lumps scuttling over my arms. Bugs. There were bugs crawling all over me. I tore at my shirt buttons as blood poured into my eye. My shirt came away and I swiped at my skin, shivering with the cold and pure fear. But after a second I realised that I was brushing at nothing. There were no bugs, nothing swarming across me. What the hell?

"Paaatricks."

My head snapped up. Ahead of me a figure was looming out of the fog. I couldn't see who it was, but I realised that there was someone to my right as well. And my left. The scars on my chest throbbed in the cold as the uncanny trio approached. I tried to call out but couldn't find a voice.

The figures didn't seem to be walking, but gliding towards me, each holding out one hand, elongated in the mist, and all the time, that voice, taunting me.

"Patrick's been a bad boy. Patrick needs a spank."

At that point the mist above me seemed to clear and a shaft of moonlight cut through the gloom, illuminating the figure in front of me.

"Miss Batt?"

The Librarian was staring at me, her face a mask of hatred. I tried to joke, but to no avail.

"You shouldn't be out at this time? It's not safe."

"Not safe he says," came the wheeze of a voice to my left. It was the Miss Winters, the receptionist from the asylum; glasses perched upon her weed-like nose. "He breaks into my home and claims it is not safe."

"He should be taught a lesson," came the third voice from the woman to my right, a plump, jowly dame that I didn't know. "He should be taught a lesson."

"Yes," the others cackled, "Taught a lesson."

This was stupid. What was I doing cowering on the floor in front of three old women? Get a hold of yourself Spencer. This would do your reputation no good at all.

"He's bleeding, look." Winters said, while her chubby friend just giggled.

"The poor baby." Miss Batt added. "We should wash that wound."

"No, no. It's fine." I started but Miss Batt broke into a toothy grin.

"I insist."

Miss Batt's tongue shot from her mouth and whipped towards me. Logically I should have realised this was impossible but it's not every day that your local librarian shoots a black snake from her mouth that wraps itself around your head. I struggled, my hands clawing at the fleshy strip that slimed against my skin, but couldn't pull it off, my hands slick with mucus. I gagged as the fat woman swam into view, her skin mottling before my eyes.

"Mmmm, tasty," she drooled as he skin literally flaked away into a swarm of roaches that tumbled down on me and pierced my skin with their razor sharp claws. My body shook in shock as darkness swam on the edge of my vision. As the shadows fell about me, the last thing I saw was Miss Winters raising a clawed hand that shot down like lightening and plunged into my chest. Cackling laughter rang in my ears as I tasted blood.

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I woke with a cry, gasping for breath. My hand shot to my chest and I half expected to find a gaping hole where Miss Winters had ripped out my heart. Gingerly I reached up and touched my pulsating temple. I didn't find a slaver tongue but a tight bandage wrapped around my head.

"They anoint themselves under the arms and in other hairy places."

Slade's voice echoed around my bedroom. I let my head fall back into the pillow.

"They what?"

"Anoint themselves," he repeated, "according to the 15th Century curator of the Church of St John the Beheaded."

My head spun wildly. How had I ended up back here?

"You're probably wondering how you ended up back here." Slade said. "Well, once again you have me to thank for saving your skin. I found you half naked, having some kind of seizure."

"A seizure?"

"Don't worry. I've checked you over. You'll be fine."

"You some kind of Doctor now, Slade?"

"Not exactly, kid," came the reply. "Now, listen to this. The herb Henbane was once used to treat earache, but has deadlier uses as Hamlet's father discovered when a lethal distillation of the plant was poured into his ear while he slept."

With great effort I glanced over to Slade, who sat by my bed reading aloud from a book.

"What have you got there?"

"*Summerisle's Journal of Hexes and Witchery*. I found another copy."

"Lucky you. Funny, I wouldn't have thought you were the reading type, Slade."

He wasn't listening.

"In quantities of four leaves or more, anyone foolish enough to ingest Henbane would find themselves prey to dizziness and hallucinations, before fever, difficulty in breathing and irregular heart beat sets in. Fifteen henbane seeds cause nothing but death, but the high concentration of alkaloid hyoscyamine, atropine and scopolamine cause powerful hallucinations in smaller doses. Is it no wonder that the oracles of the ancients were said to smoke henbane in order to visit the realm of the gods?"

Slade looked up from his book, steely eyes obviously waiting for some kind of acknowledgement. I gave nothing but a groan.

"Slade, I'm in no mood for a lecture. You have no idea what I've been through tonight."

"I think I do. Look, henbane was one of the herbs that medieval witches used to brew up what's known as 'The Witches Salve.' They used to rub it into their bodies so they could experience what it was like to fly."

"Sounds wild," I said, slurring my words "Did they have a shot of whisky in there too?"

"No, the fat of an unbaptised boy child, actually."

"Nice. Now, please explain what this all has to do with me."

"I will," Slade agreed, to my surprise, "once you put some clothes on. We're going to pay a visit to the weird sisters."

"The what?"

"The three witches that attacked you tonight."

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"So, old kooks used to use this Henbane to get themselves off so they believe they could whiz around on broomsticks or something. So what?"

Slade shook his head. "I thought you were a newshawk. I found henbane at Winter's house remember?"

To be honest as we marched along the way to Whicker Avenue, I was finding it hard to remember my own name.

"Sergeant Hambling has suspected that Miss Batt, Winter and Stephens have been practicing witch-craft for some time now." Slade explained.

"How do you know Sergeant Hambling?"

"I know all kinds of people," came the reply. "Now, when I found you, you were yapping that the old women were attacking you, that they had some kind of power. Yet none of the 'witches' were there."

I shivered despite myself. Now, there was something I'd been trying to forget. My chest began to throb again.

"Have you ever heard of astral projection?" Slade asked. I didn't have time to reply as we had arrived at Miss Winters' door. Slade knocked but there was no answer, so out came the bizarre key ring again. Seconds later, we were inside.

The first thing that hit me, even in my groggy state was the overwhelming smell of recently extinguished candles. We followed out noses and found ourselves outside the lounge door. Slade's face creased as he pushed the door open and revealed then scene within. The place was a mess, furniture strewn all about and candles everywhere, wax dripping over the floor and splashed up against the walls. The carpet had been rolled back and a rough was pentagram scrawled across the exposed floor. I hope to hell that it was painted in red paint. There, in the middle of the room lay two bodies, each with the others hand grasped around its neck, eyes bulging from the sockets as the breath was throttled away. Slade swept over and felt for a pulse. Nothing. Both Miss Winters and Batt were dead.

A whimpering to our right caused us both to spin round. I immediately recognised the figure that sat crouched in the corner. The jowly woman who had bugged out in my... whatever it was. She was clutching her stomach as if she could hold the stream of blood that spread from the knife that was plunged into her guts. This must be Miss Stephens. I felt my own innards twist. So Slade was right and these three bitches had been meddling in black magic. That's how they'd attacked me but it looked as if their latest game had gone

wrong. Perhaps one of them had gone mad and tried to blip the others. Good. They deserved it.

I looked up. Slade was kneeling beside Stephens, checking their wounds. I was no Croaker but even I knew she was a goner.

"What happened?" Slade asked.

The fat woman turned a bloodless face to look at Slade with beseeching eyes.

"We tried to stop her. We tried, but we weren't strong enough."

"Who? Who did you tried to stop?"

Stephens choked on her blood.

"She wanted to join us, but she wasn't... wasn't pure. She followed the black path... not our ways. She couldn't join..."

Slade's voiced raised in the silence of the room.

"Who couldn't join? Tell me?"

"She used the Salve... to project herself and create... demons that attacked... we tried to stop her... but she... so strong... so strong."

For a second I thought Slade was going to hit the dying woman. Part of me knew I should call for an ambulance. Part of me didn't care.

"Tell me who it was," Slade continued, "before it's too late."

A chubby, blood-soaked hand reached up and grabbed Slade's coat, pulling him in. I couldn't make out what the woman whispered to him but as her hand slumped back to the floor and her head lolled back, I knew it had been her last words.

"Good riddance." I hissed, with undisguised malice.

Slade snorted.

"You still think these women are still responsible?" he asked with a sneer. Letting Stephens' body fall, the tall man drew himself up to his full height and loomed over me. "Batt, Winters and Stephens were white witches. Their coven has been a part of Bathampton for decades. They offer herbal remedies, not curses and try to heal, not rip out hearts."

"But they tried to attack me. In the fog..."

"Are these really the women who attacked you?" he scoffed, indicating the three dry old corpses. "When I found you, you were raving about snakes for tongues and skin that shaved away to unleash cockroaches."

I shrank back at the memory.

"These are just three old women. Flesh and blood. Well, at least they were. You were attacked by a sophisticated mental projection. It was real, but the results of a powerful mind amplified by the special qualities of the Witches Salve, which in the right conditions can enable the user to project their will out of their body."

"Oh yeah, well if they didn't do it, what's the angle? Who's doing all the projecting?" I shot back.

Slade was barely inches away from me.

"Someone who wanted to join the coven, but was rejected. Someone who followed the dark path. Someone who, scorned by the coven, used her powers to have her revenge, to frame them, attacking the symbols of all that is holy, driving the church caretaker to commit suicide, fracturing the pastor's mind and then attacking the reporter who was investigating the strange goings on. It was only a matter of time before someone came looking for the three old ladies. And that someone was me."

"You really expect me to believe there are more than one set of witches in Bathampton?" I spat in his face.

"No, not now. After this butchery, there's only one."

"Yeah? You going to tell me who then?"

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The door opened and Julie gasped when she saw me. I must have been a sight, what with the grubby bandage around my head. I just hoped she would let me in.

"Look," I said, "I know you think I'm a wrong kind of gee, but I've had the worst night. Can I come in?"

Julie hesitated and then shrugged, moving out of the threshold.

"I guess."

I thanked her and stepped into the apartment, reaching out to touch her arm. She recoiled. "Don't touch me," she snapped. "and shut that door behind you."

I shook my head, sadly.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Doll."

"And why not, mister?"

"Because then I couldn't walk in."

Julie jumped at the sound of Slade's voice, as he stepped around the door and slammed it closed behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" Julie spluttered. "What's the meaning of this, Patrick?"

"Don't blame the kid," Slade said, "he's trying his hardest to hold onto his marbles as it is. You should have finished him off while you had him in the fog, before I showed up. What was the matter, didn't have the strength to hit us both with multiple hallucinations?"

"I think you should both leave."

"I think you should answer the questions." Slade was walking past Julie and towards the bedroom door. "Tell me, why did you force the coven to kill themselves? Were they fighting back? Was that a binding ceremony? We're they trying to clip your broom?"

Julie was shaking now, her fists tight with an-



ger. I just shuffled on my feet, staring straight ahead. If he was wrong about this...

"I'm warning you..."

"What are you going to do, Julie?" Slade shouted. "Whip me with your forked tongue? Drown me in bugs? Conjure up a demon or two? Well, perhaps, I should make the first move."

Before I could stop him, Slade swung up his gun hand and fired a slug right at Julie. Instinctively, I dove towards her but faltered as the lead passed clear through her body, as if it had shot through steam. With a thud the bullet lodged safely in the wall.

"Stupid little man." Julie bellowed, her voice cracking with rage. "You should have stayed in Washington. But no, you had to interfere. Well, let's give you something to interfere with."

Slade didn't flinch as barbed tentacles erupted from Julie's body and whipped towards him. My kisser flapped slack as I watched my girlfriend's body expand before our eyes into a mass of flailing tendrils snapping above our heads.

"Quick, the door." Slade ordered, but I was frozen to the spot. He cursed and shoved me out of the way. "Remember what I told you, that's not her body. It's not real, just an illusion. Now, move."

As 'Julie' roared in frustration, I dodged the onslaught and run to the bedroom door flinging it open. There on the bed lay Julie, naked from head to toe and covered in a thin grey slime - the Witches Salve. Her body shook and strained in time with the projection she was creating in the other room, a projection that although Slade tried to convince me wasn't real, somehow managed to wrap a startlingly corporeal tentacle around my neck. I gagged, trying to squeeze the life out of the tendril, as Slade cried out something. What was he talking about? I wasn't choking myself. It was this... thing, this creature.

As my knees began to buckle, I felt Slade shove past me and face Julie as she writhed on the bed. Struggling against the monster, I tried to call out as I saw him raise his shooter, tried to yell no as he declared that it was time he brought her back to earth and tried to scream as I watched the metal shatter her knee.

Julie squealed in agony and as she did, I felt the creature loosen its grip on my neck, so quickly that for a second my own palm seemed to be squeezing the life out of me. Gasping, I fell to the floor, looking up to Slade who simply sneered at the woman I thought I would be able to fall in love with.

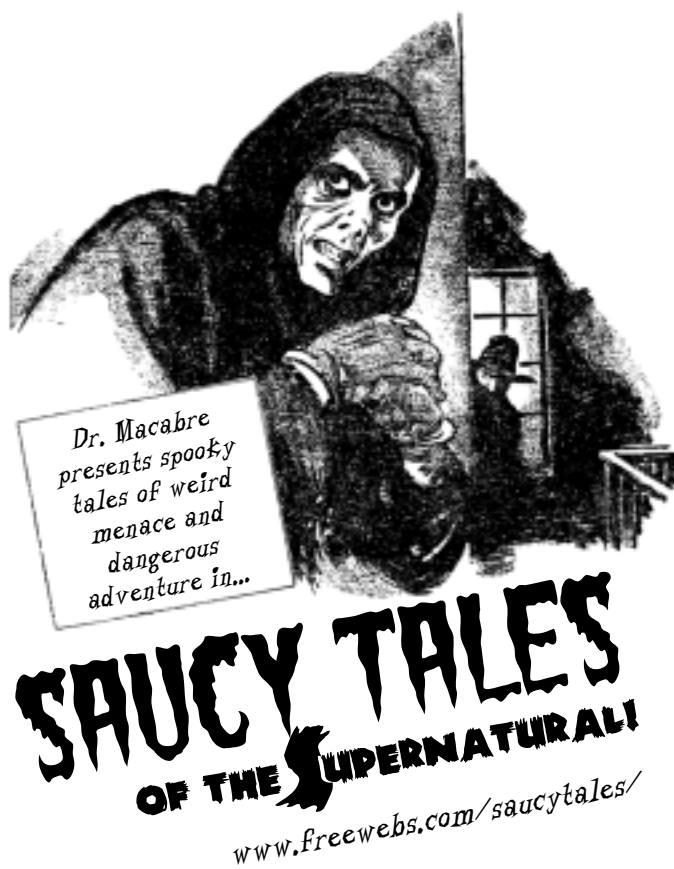
"Hard to concentrate with a smashed joint, ain't it?" he growled, finally lowering his arm. "Guess we broke the spell."

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I still can't believe old Warwick agreed to a leave of absence. I needed time to get my head together, but the old walrus wasn't known for his mercy and benevolence. Warren in typesetting had said he'd heard that Sergeant Hambling had put a word in for me. Who knows? At the end of the day, I needed it. There was no way I could put in the work after all that. Slade had stood by me as Julie was packed off into the back of a meat wagon. I asked him what was going to happen to her and all he would say was that men in very high places wanted a word with that young lady. As they drove off, I tried my hardest not to give into the waterworks that were stinging my eyes. A couple of days ago the world had seemed rosy. Now, I couldn't see past tomorrow.

I'd come to Bathampton to build myself a new life, but that hadn't lasted long. Everything was broken again and I didn't know how to put it back together again. The place didn't feel like home anymore. It was tainted, soiled. For the briefest of moments, I half considered asking Slade if I could come with him, if he had any space at his 'Preternatural Investigation Agency' but when I turned to ask, the gorilla had gone, vanished into thin air.

As the cold winter air cut through my clothes, I let myself fall back against the wall. Perhaps it was time to fly away myself. ☹





# First Person Singular: “I Shot Down King Kong”

by Mars Farraday  
(as told to Richard Siegel)

*When a guy joins the “flying circus” he doesn’t expect to  
have to clean up after the animals.*

I’m sure you’ve all heard the stories by now, maybe even seen the fictional movie that was rushed into the picture shows to cover up the truth, but let me tell you folks something—it wasn’t Beauty that killed the Beast but me and my .30 caliber Vickers machine guns twin mounted on my Curtiss bi-plane. Anything else ya mighta heard about that day was a lotta hooley and nothing but the bunk.

There wasn’t a heckuva lot on the table in the beginning of ’33 for me and the boys—Woody,

Omaha, Niles and “Space”, ‘cause we had been left high and dry at *Nick’s Grill* when Seamus and Strobey had taken the Flying Circus south for the winter. We all had thought that too much hooch had gotten the better of the mad Irishman as he decided to follow Clyde Beatty’s one ring rinky dink down south below the Mason-Dixon. “Too damn cold to be flying these heaps this winter,” Seamus had chided us before he and Strobey loaded our remaining Jennys and Bleriot and ran off to join

that *other* circus.

After the Great War, we boys had pretty much stuck together through thick and thin. Even though we hadn't clocked much action in the air with the AEF "over there" (Cap'n Eddie had hogged most of the glory for himself) we had all pawned our medals and "glory pay" to buy a couple of war surplus aero-planes and between the seven of us we had barnstormed all through these here 48 states more than once. Somehow between the bathtub gin, the all night rummy games, Space's predilection for asian dens of ill repute and the occasional pinch of chandu, there was never much more scratch to be had than what ol' Seamus had secured away in his sock. And that, lemme tell ya, was not much.

For the past coupla weeks we were ensconced at Nick's whileing away the hours, listening to the wireless and teaching ourselves new card tricks. Nick had an "in" with some of the old Navy brass at Miller Field and after much wheeling and dealing had gotten us the occasional odd job showing the fresh faced blue and whites how real fly boys rolled the wheels of chance high in the sky. For a guy who's accent was unintelligible as his signature was illegible, Nick was aces and his bathtub gin was just swell in opening closed doors. After all, since when was there any love lost between the Army and the Navy —especially since the last big game? Freelance aerial combat flight instructor sounds good on a resume' but it wasn't all it was cracked up to be especially in *those* Navy Curtiss 02C-2s trainers. Often the money wasn't worth the risk, but still we put on quite the show - Immelman loops, Double Dutch and all those death defying hijinks that make flappers swoon and grown men gasp.

The big news the past week in all the rags was the return of moving picture producer Carl Denham and the upcoming exhibition of some **THING** he had brought back "alive". A cut rate Frank Buck, Denham was. None of us thought or cared much about Denham - frankly, he was a buncha hooey and the biggest windbag since Chester A. Arthur— all ballyhoo about lost islands and headhunting weird natives with shrunken heads and nubian dancing girls. His last picture, "Grasslands" was a real floperoo—like they say in the trades. That stinker went bellyup faster than the Luisitania sank— who in their right minds would pay good hard earned moolah for some long winded yarn of Siberian herdsman starving to death in the frozen north. Geez, we got problems of our own these days, and repealing the 18th was putting the squeeze on small timers like Nick. I mean if we was to see a moving picture show bring on the tomatoes, the jazz babies— the flora *and*

the fauna — if you know what I mean, chum.

None of us gave a hoot about Denham. The only thing that caught our eye was the gams of some extra oomph that was pictured with Ol' Carl and some mook in a monkey suit. The gal's name was Ann Darrow, and she put the zip in zippidy-doodah. She had more curves than Harlow and a million dollar smile that could power all of Hackensack. Rag after rag had showcased Ann's considerable charms and Nick's "mission board" had more black and whites of Ann's gams than "specials of the day". Heck, she was the special of the day - all week long, and we had been competing as to who would turn up the pic of the day. Needless to say, in our minds, if that's what Denham had "brought back alive", our estimation of him as a showman had risen a notch or two. We were in love and each morning and late into the night, our talk was how and why one of us would make time with the intimable Ann. Since the level of our good natured comraderie would make a viper blush, I won't be repeating it here but you get the drift, don't ya, rube?

On the morning in question it was still night. We'd just gotten back from our usual Saturday night out with the Blue and Whites and "Brit Boy" had just happened to be in town. He was one of our old chums from the RFC and had been barnstorming. His beat up Spad sure could of used some much needed repair and he was hoping to make some scratch as a wing mate for our "low rent escradille". Needless to say we were all pretty pickled when we got back to Nick's for some much needed rations—"the absorption factor" as Woody liked to put it. Sometimes "incoming" was met with a flurry of "outgoing" — it was all in the mix and often our Saturday nights were more scientific in nature than therapeutic.

As we piled into the booth, Nick came rushing over, his hands wringing his grease spattered apron. "You hear? You hear?!"

Omaha lit a fag and grinned, baring his considerable maw, "Yeah Nick - we're here. Business is about to pick up."

Brit Boy chimed in, "And I hear that ya got a bucket for our post-empirical offerings? No offense but your yank beer is quite inadequate and my rum tummys..."

"No! No - no!" Nick exclaimed. "Hear about Kong?!"

"Kong? From Hop Sing's Pagoda of Pleasure?" Leave it to Space to know "who, what and where" in the local opium dens.

"NO!" Nick was getting redder in the face by the second. "Kong! King Kong!"

"Who's Kong and what's he king of?" I mocked Nick. Good ol' Nick— always the master of under-

statement.

"Denham's monkey— big big monkey - escaped!"

We roared with laughter. Denham had all this free PR in the nickel rags with bringing back a monkey - some nickle and dime baboon out of Java? *What a showman...*

"Nick - that's nice - look I'd like the eggs and swine over easy."

"Pig in a poke and a side of —"

"No, Niles - you chump - big monkey - 40 stories tall escaped— on a rampage—"

"Forty, Nick? That's kinda *big* for a chimp, ain't it?!"

"Yeah - yeah big monkey - the biggest! And he's got Ann Darrow!"

"Ann Darrow?!" our ears pricked up.

"Yeah - big monkey got her in his hairy paw. He smash buildings, eat people— no good that Kong!" Nick blurted out. "No good at all."

He went behind the counter and cranked up the wireless. News was sketchy and wildly inaccurate (as we discovered later). Kong was pretty BIG alright, but not as big as the buildup Nick had given him. Forty feet high - not forty stories. A gorilla and not a monkey. Nor did he sink the Staten Island ferry. Nor did he eat Mrs. Patrick Campbell. But he *had* wrecked the Third Avenue El...

As we gathered round, we slowly pieced together the news as it was broadcast in a jumbled tangle of confusion and horror. Evidently Denham had originally booked Yankee Stadium for his big show but the Yanks were in the Series again. He tried the Polo Grounds but they were inadequate and Ebbets Field was out of the question. No one puts on a big show and charges 20 bucks for ducats and expects 'em to go to Brooklyn. What would the fur and penguin set say? So he leases the Roxy on the Great White, just north of the Deuce, and fills the house. Most are expecting a picture show but the buildup in the press has everyone jumping about a "personal appearance" of "the tallest, darkest leading man in the world". Still, any of the Barrymores or Karloff the Uncanny ain't filling the house for a coupla Jacksons unless they're in a truck and whistle of "Giselle" and even that's doubtful. "Eighth Wonder of the World" was the billing and still everyone assumed he was talking about Ann Darrow's gams.

So all the swells are scratching their bottoms when Denham comes out in front of this enormous curtain and was all set to break into some long winded yammer when he changes his mind and invites Ann ("resplendently clad in an opulent shimmering gown, transluscent in it's splendor" the Times wrote in *their* account) to join him on stage as well as some lug named Driscoll who evidently saved her from something or other.

So then Denham invites all the photogs from the Fourth Estate to join them onstage too so they can get "some swell shots of Kong and his captors". So now ya got Denham, some dame, a lug in a tux and about 20 newshounds ready to flash their bulbs wild. Yawn.

If I had been in the audience then I would've been seriously thinking about getting a refund myself when the curtain raises. The crowd gasps and suspended high above the stage is this big ape in chains — like I said, about 40 ft tall. And most folks who were there that night say the big guy was not enthralled with bein' there either. He's roaring and straining at his stainless steel shackles and chains. Denham assures the audience that Kong's been doped but good and everything is just peachy keen. That is until the newboys start clicking away...

Kong goes nuts—flat out bonkers ! He thinks they're attacking the girl. He rips out of those chains like they were turkish taffy, leaps off his podium and starts wrecking everything in sight. Ann gets away but he rips apart half of Manhattan looking for her. He's stomping on cable cars, chewing on folks plucked at random, smashing cabs and turns a bread line into hash for the meat wagons. Kong is the biggest brouhaha to hit Madhatten since Gentlemen Jimmy's last election! Now they can't find the big guy anywhere...he's disappeared in the stone canyons. How in the heck do ya lose a monkey that big? This just in! Kong's got Ann Darrow and he's just finished making a soufflé out of the elevated on Third and Thirty Third.

We are surrounding the wireless spellbound. Even Space has come out of his usual narcotic induced haze and is at rapt attention. Woody's chaining Pall Mall after Pall Mall. Omaha's stopped guzzling his joe. Niles' cupcakes are forgotten. Nick's on his way to a minor grease fire on the stove.

"You yanks really do have a flair for the dramatic, don't ya? This show's a lot better than we have on the Beeb—much more vivid." Brit Boy sipped his tea laced with rum.

"This ain't no damn radio show!" Nick snapped.

"Certainly it is." Brit Boy declared emphatically. "Who'd ever believe such fantastic nonsense? Apes the size of buildings—damsels in distress. Lurid carnage. Fiction pure and simple but spellbinding drama, eh what? A radio drama or at the very least - a hoax." He tapped his pack of Dunhills and offered Nick one. Sense and sensibility - the Brit, as always. But we knew better.

A lot of strange things had been happening recently - tales of giant albino rats, phantom plumbers, murdered magicians had been circulating for weeks. Space had gotten the inside dope (more or

less) from some of Hop Sing's less discreet clientele. Although I don't think Kong had had anything to do with any of that. Denham had made his own mulligan and now he had to wallow in it. I felt bad for the girl but Denham was well on his way to the world's biggest lawsuits, as befitting the world's biggest chump, if not actually clocking some time up river.

The phone rang in the booth back by the men's room. Nick hadn't planned it too well when he had selected that particular location for the phone booth as its proximity to the head's stench made all calls short ones. Nick grabbed it. He jammed

incoherently into the receiver and rushed out breathlessly.

"That was Colonel Lamont at the field...he wants you boys over there and in the air pronto!"

"What's the what-for, Nicky?"

"Kong's climbing the Empire State building and he's still got the girl—"

"She's still alive?"

"Yeah - come on - the aero-planes! That's how we can hit him and not her and if he'll just put her down," the words barely had escaped Niel's lips when we all piled into Omaha's Stutz Bearcat.

Brit Boy remained sitting at the counter. "What's



**"Kong goes nuts— flat out bonkers! He thinks they're attacking the girl. He rips out of those chains like they were turkish taffy, leaps off his podium and starts wrecking everything in sight."**

**They portrayed the "Kong" creature in the movie adaptation through a combination of "stop-motion" animation and trick photography. The monkey in the above still is actually a model that stands only 18 inches tall. The real thing was much bigger, I can assure you! — M. Farraday**



all the fuss about?" he murmured.

Space grabbed him by the lapels, "Come on—don't be a ponce! Let's go— the British are coming, Kaiser Bill's up a hill. We need your chops, now!" Space threw him into the backseat on top of Niles and Woody and jumped onto the running board. "Go!" The stutz reared back and exploded down the dusty road in a torrent of speed.

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In the east, dawn was slowly looming over the vast expanse of Manhattan. From the west, we came barrelling in out of the clouds— each one of us in our own Curtiss with a Navy gunner. Colonel Lamont had joined us in the air as well in the point position. You gotta love a skipper who goes up with his boys. Seven aero-planes made their way across the Hudson from Jersey, high above the Palisades. I gave my gunner, "Gunny" Cooper, the thumbs up and pointed at the tallest structure man had ever built. He nodded and checked his Vickers. Both barrels spat their incendiary fury. Lamont knew damn well that the only way those fresh faced swabbies'd have a shot at downing Kong would be to have us aces at the controls. Between the pilot's front mounted dual action and the rear gunner's single, that big furry galoot was about to taste some hot lead—Farraday style.

I flew in right behind Lamont's bi-plane. The closer we dove in, the bigger that ape appeared, a behemoth against the urban jungle. Kong still held the tattered blonde beauty in his grasp. His feet were wrapped around the round observation dome maintaining a precarious balance high above the city. I looked over on my right and saw Brit Boy shaking his head - he still couldn't believe his own eyes. Kong unleashed a million year old roar of primordial rage into the cool morning air. His fetid breath almost made me retch - the foulness of it indescribable. Woody buzzed him - swooping in at a 45 degree angle, narrowly brushing his simian head. Kong was getting mighty sore at us. If he wanted to get at us with a free hand, he'd have to put Ann down. Omaha circled him in loops of care-

less derring-do and reckless showmanship. This wasn't some fairground performance at Podunk, Iowa but the real McCoy and the spectre of death incarnate was barrelling down upon us. Or rather we were barrelling down upon IT! Kong's eyes grew swollen and red as his fury intensified. These flying gnats were really getting on monkey boy's nerves.

I looped around the massive structure again, jockeying for a higher altitude. The gunner tapped me on the shoulder. The big monkey was taking the bait - he gingerly laid the unconscious girl on the 86th floor's observation deck. This was it! I cocked my guns and made ready.



**In the fictional movie, I was played by the director, Merlan C. Cooper (at left) and Gunny was played by the producer, Ernest B. Schoedsack (right). Mr Schoedsack confided to me that they chose to do this cameo because after all the technical difficulties involved in bringing the story to the screen, Mr Cooper decided one day that "we should kill the sonofabitch ourselves."**

**— M. Farraday**

Omaha led, followed by Niles. White hot bullets spat out their siren song of death. Kong swiped fast at the aero-planes as they streaked by. For somebody so big, that ape was plenty fast! I came in hard and fast out of the west. Gunny let a volley rip into his chest area. Blood slowly began to ooze from Kong's wounds. But instead of crumpling and falling, he just got madder. Madder than I had ever seen anyone, or anything, get — something so foul and black and unnameable that I can't even bear to recall it.

Swooping in from below, Space ripped a full frontal, head on assault. The monkey's paw ripped at his struts, ripping them asunder as his wings collapsed. Space went plummeting down the side of the Empire State, erupting into a ball of fire as his plane exploded over the

heads of the teeming onlookers below. I gnashed my teeth in anger. Space was one of the best we had before the junk took hold o' him and now that big mook had sent him careening in a fiery coffin to St. Pete's Gate. I was determined to send his killer to Hades - if there *was* one for big overfed chimps...

I lit up into the sun, hoping to blind Kong as I dove in. The wind tore at the struts and I could feel the fuselage starting to tear with the velocity of my descent. The ape pawed the air in vain. The aero-plane twisted as I maneuvered her into a full double Immelman loop and swept by his groping paw. Like a hanging curveball in the noon sun, I

whisked by and unloaded the double barrelled salvo, all the intensity of my hatred, into his exposed throat. Hanging there for untold seconds, I expanded every cartridge I had as did Gunny. And then Kong was out of position as we swerved into a tailspin. Straining mightily at the control stick and chanting half forgotten hosannas from my forlorn youth, I finally righted her. As we leveled out above Herald Square, narrowly missing the Gimbel's sign, Gunny smacked me on my head and gestured wildly.

Kong, the eighth wonder of the world, grasped his throat as deep red geysers spurted through his furry fingers. He looked for a moment at Ann Darrow who cowered in the shadow of the observation dome. I swear you could almost see longing and despair in the big guy's eyes as he swayed silently in the breeze. For a second I almost regretted what I had done. Kong reached out to her and then fell backwards and down the long steel and concrete escarpment to the street below. The crowds parted in a sea of bloodied fur and viscera as Kong heaved his final primeval breath.

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Afterwards, for a brief moment, we all had our moment of fame and notoriety. I had plenty of pictures taken with a very grateful Ann Darrow but no luck in the two step department. She left swabby Driscoll at the altar and moved to Hollywood and changed her name to Fay Wray. Denham, in a sea of lawsuits and possible criminal charges, fled to the South Seas with his skipper. There were a lot of rumors that they had found the son of kong - a kinder more agreeable sort of simian and brought him back to civilization to star in the motion picture bio-pic of his late lamented dad. We found what remained of Space and dropped his ashes over Manchuria.

The one thing they never mentioned in that movie or in the press for that matter, is what became of Kong's carcass. Well, lemme tell ya one thing, mac, with times being what they are, there were a lot of hungry folks and for about three weeks running a lot of "mystery meat" got gobbled up in the city soup kitchens. Don't believe me? Well, I know that for a fact 'cause *I was there*— serving it up. ☹



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**BANG!**

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# The Kirby Conclusion (or: Imelda's Solution)

by Jack Draper

"Now Melly, explain to me again why I have to wear so much lipstick?"

"Because, you don't make a very pretty woman, Kirby. The best we're going to manage is 'handsome.'" She grabbed my face in her hands. "And every little bit helps." She squinted as she scrutinized the layers of makeup she'd already applied.

"Clown makeup makes me handsome how?"

"I can't do this if you keep talking."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Shush."

I shushed, and the delightful Imelda, with the gentle grace of a master painter ran the end of the lipstick across my lower lip.

"Go like this..." she said as she opened her mouth and pulled her lips inward.

I went like that, and she took up a little pencil and outlined my lips.

"And that's called..." I asked.

"What's called?"

"That pencil you used to outline my lips."

"A lip liner."

"Ahhh... clever."

Imelda stepped back, hands on her hips, and examined her handiwork. "I think that's it," she said.

"I'm beginning to think you're doing this just to get back at men for inventing high-heels. You say you do this to yourself every morning?"

"Not in so many layers, but basically every morning. And yes," she smiled. "Revenge is part of it. Okay, go on. Take a look."

Up until this point, I'd been facing away from the mirror on the makeup table in Imelda's bedroom. And no, it's not what you think. Imelda's a very proper girl. Her bedroom was just the most convenient place in which we could dress me up like a woman.

And, no. That's not what you think either. I am definitely not in the habit of dressing like a woman and I was only doing it because dressed as a woman I stood a chance of making myself a small fortune. See? It was strictly business...

I'm probably not helping my case much here.

Okay, it's like this... The late Ambassador of Nova Zembla attempted to kill me some weeks ago through the use of chemically-altered, radio-con-

trolled, carnivorous lab-rats. They did not, however kill me. They instead decided to feast upon the ambassador himself. Hence the “late” part. In the ensuing investigation, the police happened to find the Ambassador’s diary in which he’d detailed how he managed to finance his lab rat lab. Among these notes were mention of a fabled “golden treasure” which he had squirreled away in a safety-deposit box at the First City Savings bank in Manhattan. Fearing that he’d be on the lam once he’d put his chemically-altered, radio-controlled, carnivorous lab-rat scheme in action, perhaps even for more many years, he included clues on how to retrieve his treasure as a memory aid for when he came back to claim it.

As you can see, it’s all very simple.

Well, as things fell out, my good buddy Detective Toller was in charge of the investigation of the Ambassador’s dealings, and taking pity on me for all I’d gone through with the chemically-altered, radio-controlled, carnivorous lab-rats, he let me have a copy of these clues and said that if I could retrieve the treasure before the police got around to having it seized, I could keep it.

Nice guy that Toller.

So, after doing a little research at the library. Or, rather, after inviting Imelda, my boss’ secretary, to accompany me to the library and then watching her do the research for me, I had armed myself with a clever plan with which I would recover the Zemblan Ambassador’s treasure, the first step of which involved dressing me up as a woman.

And as I sat there, staring into Imelda’s mirror at the new me, I didn’t rightly understand why it had to work this way either.

“So what do you think?” she asked me.

“When I was a kid, I had a dog named Dutch. He got into my mom’s purse once and ate her lipstick. I look slightly better than Dutch did.”

“How long have you been planning that joke?”

“Since I got here.”

“Well, I think you look fine. A bit like my grandmother, actually.”

“Explain to me again why you, who is already a woman, can’t go and claim the treasure?”

“Because you’re going to have to impersonate the Zemblan Ambassador posing as a woman, because that’s what he was doing when he signed up for the safety deposit box.”

“And we know this because...?”

“You know very well why.”

“Tell me again and pretend I’m just hearing the plan for the first time.”

“Because, he said the first name he used when he got the safety deposit box was the same as his monarch’s. And we looked it up. Her name is Queen Blenda.<sup>1</sup> It makes perfect sense. He said that he went in disguise so that he wouldn’t be recognized. And what better disguise for a man than to dress up as a woman? For us to get the treasure, we’ll have to do the same, and I can’t go because I don’t look anything like him.”

“But I do?”

“Judging by what he said in his diary about how his friends laughed at him when they saw him in his costume, he didn’t dress up to be a very attractive woman. And in case you haven’t noticed, you don’t either. So if you go, they’ll see another...”

“Handsome...”

“Okay, *handsome* older woman, just like the one who signed up for the box. But if I were to go, they would see a very *pretty* woman and know something is up.”

You have to admit, she had me there.

“And besides, Kirby, you’ve been impersonating his accent for the last month.”

“But just as a joke.”

“You’ve got it cold. You’ll be fine. Are you ready to go?”

“Now?”

“Oh wait, I forgot the *pièce de résistance*.” From a hatbox next to her makeup table, she pulled a little black pillbox hat, set it atop my head, and pulled a lace veil down over my face, thus obscuring my features.

“Very, *very* clever, Imelda my dear.”

“Make sure to mention to them that someone close to you has died recently and that’s why you want to recover your keepsake. Then, if anyone tries to examine you too closely, you can pretend to cry and dab at your eyes with your handkerchief. People always give grieving ladies a wide berth. Now, do you remember your name, Ma’am?”

“Blenda Bodkin,” I said in my best falsetto Zemblan accent. “Bodkin? You’re sure about that.”

“Positive. He said that the surname he used was the same as the name of the item he was storing away. And in the diary, he said that he would rather ‘bare’ his treasure and use it to plunge himself into the Beyond than suffer ignominy. He’s clearly saying he’d commit suicide before he’d face humiliation in the press.”

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<sup>1</sup> Nova Zembla is an anglicization of Novaya Zemlya, an island off the northern coast of Russia. It does not have a monarch. The country Imelda is referring to is the Nova Zembla of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*. In that book, Nabokov describes Zemblan history, society and geography in some de-

tail. At the time he published his book, 1962, the monarch of Zembla, Charles Xavier, was in exile. As Kirby’s story takes place during or before 1933 (as indicated by the date on the cover of the magazine), then Zembla’s monarch would be Charles’ mother, Queen Blenda.

"Yeah, I caught that."

"So, his treasure has to be something he could use to kill himself with. Like a dagger."

"Not a gun?"

"But then you have to ask yourself why he'd use an obscure word like 'fardel'?"

"Yes. I thought that was awfully magniloquent of him."

"It's Hamlet, Kirby! Act three, scene one.<sup>2</sup> It's all in there. *He himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin... Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life...* It's only the 'to be or not to be' speech. I thought you'd get that one at least."

"But that's the part I don't get. What was the Queen of Zembla doing with a gold dagger... er, bodkin... lying around?"

"He said that he purloined it from her *éscritoire*. That's French for 'writing desk.' She was probably using it as a letter opener."

"I'm going through all this to recover a stolen letter opener!"

"If it's a royal heirloom made out of gold, it's probably worth a lot of money. Even if it is just a letter opener," Imelda said. "You know how the aristocracy is. They're not like you or me. Their sense of proportion is all out of whack. Why, I've heard that royalty will do to priceless antiques things we wouldn't do to stuff we're planning to throw away."

"Oh yeah?" And then I chewed on that on for a moment. "I don't even know what that means," I said.

Imelda patted my pillbox. "And it's best that you don't," she said. "Okay, now when you get to the safety deposit box, do you remember the combination of the lock?"

"Ahh..."

"The first number is Queen Blenda's birthdate. These things usually use a series of two-digit numbers, so it's probably just the last two digits in the year."

"Ahh..."

"Seventy-eight. And the second number is?"

"Ahh..."

"It's her first regnal year."

"Ahh..."

"That means the first year that she was queen."

Come on, Kirby."

"Ahh..."

"Eighteen. Now the last number is the year the heir, her son Charles Xavier, was born."

"Ahh..."

"Fifteen. Don't you remember us looking all this up?"<sup>3</sup>

"Ahh..."

"Here..." She grabbed my hand and with the lip liner wrote 78-18-15 on my wrist. "Really Kirby, I don't know how you've managed to survive this long out there. I should be the one tracking down missing diplomats, solving mysteries, escaping from mad scientists and braving the chemically-altered, radio-controlled, carnivorous lab-rats."

I flashed her a hideous, be-lipsticked smile. "Ah, Melly. Who knows? Maybe you'll get your chance. Now what say you and me go pick up that treasure. Then maybe you can take your grandma out for tea?"

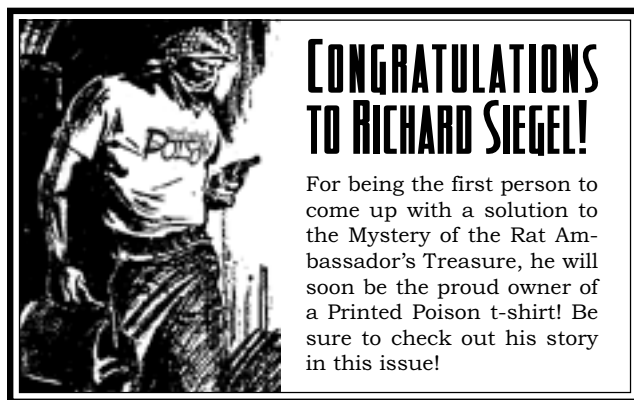
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And that's it. End of story.

But you're probably wondering what happened next. Did the plan go off without a hitch? Did I get the golden treasure? Did the delightful Imelda and I go for that tea? Was the bodkin worth a small fortune? Am I a rich man now?

For the answer to those questions you'll just have to wait and see. But let me put it to you this way, if in future you don't see any of my stories kicking around, that means I don't have to peddle fiction to make a living anymore.

Otherwise... ☹



<sup>2</sup> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
— *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

<sup>3</sup> These dates can all be found in the index of *Pale Fire*.





# Together They Die

by Brian Cain

*Late one night on a lonely highway, Hal Willock and Jack Rose discover that some crimes can never be forgotten.*

I'm not sure how to begin this story because I'm still not sure if I believe it. What Hal and I encountered has never before been revealed; but I need to tell this story and if you believe me or not doesn't matter because it's been eating away at my insides for far too long - I've already seen it destroy one man, a good man who deserved better - and I can't keep it inside me anymore.

My name is Jack Rose and for a period of five years I had the pleasure and privilege of working with Hammerin' Hal Willock, hero cop of the Las Palmas police department. He was the kind of cop they make movies from, a homicide detective; he was a quiet man, who did more thinking than talking, but when he spoke, people listened; they used

to say that when Hal went out to make an arrest, the verdict was in, and the suspect would be brought back dead or alive. He'd cracked enough big cases for a New York publisher to ask him to write a book; I was hired to turn his notes and memories into a coherent story. One book turned into two, which turned into six, all big best-sellers. It really gave Hal something to throw himself into after his wife died (cancer), and put me on the fast-track to a career in scribbling that never let up until I decided to pack it in.

The following is my account of the only adventure I shared with Hal Willock, his last case, if you will. No official records exist - you'll see why. Take from it what you will. Believe me or not. Call

me a fool who's only playing up a local legend, I don't care. If nothing else, listen to my warning, because if I could do it all over again, I would have run away and never looked back.

\*\*\*\*\*

Twelve-thirty a.m., the sky clear, stars blinking, a Tuesday. Hal Willock and I were on the way back to Las Palmas after a working dinner where we discussed the events of our next book, which would recount the last two years of Hal's career and the case involving the Russian Hill Murders, a grisly trio of killings in an upscale area of town which Hal linked to a ring smuggling heroine. He sat behind the wheel of his big two-door Ford coupe and steered through the curving two-lane highway of Niles Canyon, a picturesque area of several miles consisting mostly of wilderness with a few homes and cabins planted here and there. In a small little town smack in the middle of it all was a steakhouse Hal loved called the Pig's Tail Inn, and we'd spent a couple of hours there. I'd filled a whole notebook in the process of our conversation.

Hal slowed for a three-way stop at a spot known as Scott's Corner, checked for traffic, began a right turn - then hit the brakes and leaned forward in his seat, his sharp eyes looking dead ahead.

I saw her too. A young woman in a white dress, covered with blood, carrying what looked like a dozen roses. She staggered along the side of the road; turning, she held her free arm up to block the glare of Hal's headlights. He and I jumped out.

"What happened to you?" Hal said, reaching out to lead the girl away from the shoulder of the road. She backed away, her face tightening in fright. "Wait! I'm not going to hurt you. What happened? Can I take you to a hospital?"

The girl's voice squeaked out from cut lips. She said, "I was on my way to a wedding and my car broke down."

*She was either a fruitcake or had her brains scrambled because nobody held a wedding this late into the night.*

"Where's your car?" Hal said.

"Back there, a few miles." She gestured with her head over Hal's shoulder. I looked back along the dark stretch of road behind us but saw no sign of a wrecked vehicle. Didn't mean she was lying, though.

Hal looked over his shoulder at me, his brow furrowed; he was thinking the same as I. I gave him a shrug. He turned back to the girl, said: "Where are you going?"

"The White Chapel Hall. I don't want to be late."

"You've missed it by now," Hal said. "Let me drive you home and you can call your friends tomorrow."

"I don't want to bother you."

"No trouble at all. But I better take you to the emergency room, first, make sure you're okay." He offered his hand again. This time the girl took it, and followed Hal on shaky legs as he brought her to the car and helped her into the back seat. I climbed back in as he slid behind the wheel.

Turning to her, I said, "I'm Jack."

She didn't even look at me. She had a cut on her forehead and a nasty-looking gash on one side of her neck. That's where most of the blood seemed to have come from, and it covered the front of an otherwise pretty dress. A modest dress, the way it went up to her neck, the long sleeves, long skirt; she wasn't one to show off any skin, and the trim figure she sported would certainly have turned a few heads.

Hal drove off.

"Who was getting married?" I said.

"My best friend from high school."

"What's your name?" I said.

"It was going to be a beautiful wedding. I was there when my friend and her husband fell in love." She stared at the back of Hal's head. "I hope I haven't missed it."

Hal said: "We should hit the emergency room in ten minutes."

I glanced out the window, saw a sign reading LAS PALMAS CITY LIMITS.

To the girl again I said: "Do you live around here?"

"I hope my friend isn't mad at me."

"Where do you live?"

"These roses need water; I hope she has water to put them in."

"Where do you live? Is there somebody we can call for you?"

"I hope my mother isn't angry with me, I've been out so late."

I opened my mouth to say something more but a grunt from Hal shut me up. I looked at him but he was watching the road and followed a short curve and then we were back in the city, passing through the Old Downtown area with its one- and two-story buildings, crumbling train station. Further into town the residences and apartment buildings took over. A bright blue sign ahead said LAS PALMAS EMERGENCY CLINIC.

"We'll get you to a doctor - " I looked in the back seat, but the girl wasn't there. No roses, no nothing, just an empty back seat.

"Hal?"

"Hmmm."

"Uh, the girl's - "

"Gone," he said. "I know."

"What do you mean - "

"Quiet, Jack. I need to think."

I just nodded and faced forward. Chills crawled

up my spine and put the hairs on my arm straight up.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hal dropped me off at my apartment and told me to get some sleep and don't worry about the girl and meet me at the library at ten o'clock sharp. I said, "How can I forget a girl who vanished right in front of us?" He said, "Do what I tell you." Well, I knew Hal well enough to listen when he gave an order like that. I could almost hear the gears turning inside his head. The explanation of the night's unusual event would come soon enough. Surprisingly, when I crawled under the covers, I went out like a light, and when my alarm sounded at nine-thirty and I saw the sun streaming through the bedroom window, I wondered if the girl had been a dream. Then the chills hit me again and I knew it wasn't a dream at all.

As I was getting out of the shower the phone rang; towel around my waist, still dripping a little, I picked up and Hal said: "You awake?"

"Yeah."

"I'm at the library already and I got something that will explain what happened last night. Get down here pronto."

\*\*\*\*\*

I found Hal sitting at a table in the back of the library with a bunch of old newspapers scattered around in front of him. I found a chair and sat beside him. He opened the paper in front of him to a headline that read YOUNG GIRL FOUND DEAD and the story told of a young woman in a white dress who'd been murdered near Scott's Corner after her car broke down - some kind of engine failure. Witnesses who drove through the area admitted seeing a girl carrying roses and trying to thumb a ride and they regretted not stopping to help her because whoever did pick her up beat her, raped her, and slashed her throat.

The girl had been identified as Helen Montgomery and her mother said that she borrowed the family car to go to the wedding of her best friend. The picture that accompanied the story showed a pretty young girl with curly black hair and cute puppy-dog eyes. Those same eyes had started blankly into the back of Hal's head during the drive through the canyon. The same girl that had a gash on the side of her neck which leaked

blood onto the front of her white dress. I stared at Hal in stunned silence, my mouth literally hanging open -

"The girl died ten years ago, Jack," Hal said.

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I said, "I don't believe it."

He gestured to the other papers on the table. "The story ran for a week or two. Nobody came forward with anything we could use. Since then it's turned into a local legend - we're not the first to see the girl. Ask around and you'll find dozens of people who either saw her themselves or know people who did and the story is always the same. She talks about the wedding, travels along with you for a while, and as soon as you hit the city limits she disappears."

"The Ghost of Scott's Corner?" I said.

He nodded.

"I've heard about it, but I never believed it."

"You don't believe in ghosts, Jack?"

"Of course not."

He smiled. "Neither do I."

"Did you work the case?"

His eyes didn't leave the girl's picture; he shook his head. "I was still a beat cop at the time and knew one of the detectives assigned to the case, and he had his suspicions, but he could never prove if his suspect was the killer or not."

"And this suspect was -"

"He's thinks he's a big shot now, if I can nail him on this it will be a good day."

"So, uh, what do we do now?"

He winked at me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hal decided we needed to see the ghost of Helen Montgomery again and try to communicate with her. See we made plans to drive out to Scott's Corner that night. I spent the day making some notes on what had happened so far, but my mind couldn't grasp any of it. This wasn't real, it couldn't be. Ghosts do not exist except in the scary stories kids tell each other around camp fires and Halloween. All that paranormal stuff is for the birds - and science fiction magazines - made up by people with overactive imaginations looking for attention. There are no such things as haunted houses or evil demons or anything like that.

But what my mind couldn't accept my eyes couldn't deny. We had seen something out at Scott's Corner. The girl had sat in the back of Hal's



**As I was getting out of the shower the phone rang; towel around my waist, still dripping a little, I picked up and Hal said: "You awake?"**

car. I had exchanged words with her. When we reached the city limits, the girl had vanished - like she was never there. The newspaper stories and photographs Hal had showed me left no doubt - the girl we'd picked up was Helen Montgomery. I just couldn't accept it.

*And the worst was yet to come.*

\*\*\*\*\*

As far as I could tell only the crickets were out at Scott's Corner that night - along with Hal and I, parked on the shoulder of the road near the corner where we saw the girl the previous night. I had my window down, my arm dangling out; Hal smoked quietly, staring ahead at a wide open field shrouded in darkness. The moon shined high, providing a dimly bright light that made it easy to see by. After the first couple of hours I was ready to pack it in, but said nothing to Hal. He had his stone face on, unmoving, staring straight ahead.

Then, Hal tapped my arm and pointed across the street on the left side of the corner. *A wandering female dressed in white, covered in blood, carrying roses -*

"I don't believe it," I said. It was turning into my mantra.

Hal shushed me and opened his door. I quickly followed behind him, my pen and notebook in my hand.

We started across the street, Hal saying, "Hello! Stop a minute. Hey, stop."

The girl stopped, slowly turned her head to examine us. She seemed sad, her face long and tired.

"We saw you last night," Hal said. "We're here to help. Can you tell us what happened to you?"

She looked over Hal's shoulder at me. "I was on my way to a wedding and my car broke down."

"Right, you told us," Hal said. "What happened before that?"

"Back there, a few miles."

She made a gesture over her shoulder in almost a replay of our conversation the night before.

"What happened before the accident?" Hal said.

"The White Chapel Hall. I don't want to be late."

I put a hand on Hal's shoulder. "Hal - "

"I don't want to bother you," the girl said. Again, a repeat of the other night. Like her words was some kind of recording, playing over and over for whoever could hear it.

"Hal - " I said again, but he kept trying to get the girl to talk. Soon it dawned on him, too, that she was repeating herself. He finally wished her good luck and stepped back. She moved ahead and started walking again. She crossed the street and kept going along the shoulder on the other side until we couldn't see her anymore.

Hal followed in her wake, and I followed him. I

knew exactly what he was thinking. We walked about 25 yards, alone in the cool air of the night, no other cars coming this way. Just Hal and I and the crickets and whatever critters lurked in the foliage. But there was no further sign of the girl.

Hal finally stopped, looked around, looked at me.

"What do we do now?" I said.

Hal's dumbfounded gaze was my only answer.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You've got to be kidding me," I said.

"It's the only way," Hal said.

"I don't believe this."

The sign in front of the shop said MISTI - YOUR PSYCHIC FRIEND and PALM READINGS FROM \$2. We left the car at the curb in front, went up to the door; Hal rang the bell. A smaller sign beside the door listed the shop's hours as 9am - 5pm. My watch read twenty before nine. I knew better than to question Hal's attempt at finding somebody on duty; besides, I was too tired to argue. After our second attempt to talk to the "ghost" the night before, I hardly slept. When a woman came to the door and unlocked it, Hal flashed his badge - his old badge, the department had let him keep it - and said he was from the police.

The woman had begun to say something prior to seeing the badge - probably something like, "Come back in thirty minutes," - but instead she said, "What can I do for you, officer?"

"I'm Detective Willock," Hal said; with a gesture to me: "This is my partner, Sergeant Rose."

It felt good having such a rank.

Hal said: "We need to talk to you."

"Is this a case the department - "

"Can we speak inside?" Hal said.

The woman nodded, stepped back to open the door, and we went into the shop, which had dark walls and carpeting; the front room consisted of a desk and chairs - typical waiting room. The woman led us through a doorway and into an office. She sat behind the desk while Hal and I took the seats in front of it, told us she was Misti (if we hadn't figured it out), and asked Hal if he'd ever visited her before. Hal admitted he hadn't, but knew of other detectives who had and had recommended he see her. She smiled a little, seemingly pleased; she was taller than either of us, with long dark hair straight down behind her shoulders. The kimono she wore had looked good at the front door, and she certainly wore it well. When she put her elbows on the desk-top and touched her fingertips together, I figured her for either somebody seriously dedicated to her craft or a pie-in-the-sky phony.

"I've helped your department with several murders, Detective Willock," she said. "What can I help with this time?" She fixed her big brown eyes on

him without blinking, didn't seem to notice me.

I was fine with that.

Hal reached into his jacket and withdrew a picture.

"This girl was murdered ten years ago," he said.

"Her name was Helen Montgomery."

"You've seen her?"

Hal only nodded.

"She still carries the roses?"

Hal nodded again.

The woman fixed her eyes on me and I almost jumped out of my chair. She still wasn't blinking. "And you?"

The words came out quietly: "I was with him. Last night. And the night before."

She turned back to Hal. "You saw her again?"

"Yes," Hal said. "I wanted to - question her." He explained our failed attempt to speak with the girl, the ghost. I still couldn't think of her as a ghost.

The woman behind the desk cracked a smile but didn't tell us what she found so funny.

"She'll never stop," the woman said. "She needs to find somebody who believes in her. Somebody who can help her, Detective Willock. Are you that person? Are you, Sergeant Rose?"

The chills were crawling up my back again.

Misti bowed her head; when she lifted it again, she finally blinked. I almost sighed in relief. She said: "Nobody believes. Even those who see her refuse. She's been out there a long time, waiting; she's been through so much pain already, she needs somebody to set her free. If you've seen her two nights in a row, you are the man to help her, Detective. She's never appeared twice in a row like that. We need to see her again. Helen Montgomery has a lot to say to us."

She sounded like she was planning a trip to the beach.

"Can you communicate with her?" Hal said.

"Of course."

"Why can't she talk to me?"

"It's a long story, Detective. And my fee is \$50 a day for this sort of thing."

"I just happen to have \$200 burning a hole in my pocket," Hal said, withdrawing a pair of C-notes from the inside pocket of his jacket. Misti took the cash; put the bills in a drawer.

"Helen Montgomery is a disturbed spirit," she said. "It was a terrible thing that happened to her, and there has been no justice in the crime. Her spirit is locked into that horrible night, like somebody trapped in a box. She only has a few words available to her and they're all either a repeat of what she said the night she died or a slight variation of those words."

"And she'll keep haunting Scott's Corner until something happens to the killer?" Hal said.

"Bingo, Detective."

I said: "If you know all of this, why haven't you done anything about it before now?"

The woman shrugged. "There was no money in it."

\*\*\*\*\*

The waiter set a pair of hot dogs in front of Hal and I - both loaded with mustard and relish with a side of fries. Hal didn't waste a minute, grabbing the first one and talking a big mouthful, mustard and relish smearing on his upper lip; I stared down at mine, not sure if I was really hungry or not.

"Eat up, Jack," Hal said, the words muffled by dog and bun. "I paid for them."

I let him see half a grin and started eating. After the first few bites, my stomach overruled my head and I ate a few of my fries, too.

We hadn't said a word to each other as we drove away from our new psychic friend's office. I'd been too stunned. But after I was half-way through my first hot dog I finally pushed the words out.

"What do you expect Misti to do?"

"Talk to the ghost," Hal said.

"You're serious?"

Hal nodded.

"I don't understand any of this," I said. "Ghosts don't exist, let alone talk."

Hal just stared at me.

"I mean, how can any of this be possible?" I said.

"There's a whole other world we know nothing about, Jack."

"You talk like this is normal."

Hal ate some more, swallowed, said: "If I'm right one of the city's biggest criminals will never breathe fresh air again."

I said: "What about Misti? She ever -"

"Yes," he said. "We've consulted with her in the past. She's helped uncover clues in some real big cases that we wouldn't have found otherwise."

"Nothing like that has ever been made public."

Hal nodded. "We decided to keep it quiet."

"Because people would think you were crazy for using a psychic? Or was she some sort of secret weapon?"

"We just decided it was best to keep her involvement quiet."

I shut my mouth and finished my lunch.

\*\*\*\*\*

Our meeting with Misti was set for that night - the third time in a row we'd try to see the ghost of Scott's Corner, Helen Montgomery. After lunch Hal dropped me at my apartment and I wrote a few pages of notes. Then I stretched out on the couch to catch a few winks before the night's activities. I

slept pretty well, too - surprisingly. No crazy dreams. But when I awoke a cold sweat covered my body and I shivered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hal and Misti sat in the front seat while I covered the back. Before we'd picked Misti up, Hal had passed me a snub-nosed Colt .38. I said, "We gonna shoot the ghost?" But he just narrowed his eyes at me and didn't laugh.

Nobody said anything while we drove; Hal pulled over to the side at Scott's Corner, cut the motor, sat back. I wanted to ask now what, but I figured I'd find out soon enough when Helen came walking by. When I looked at Misti, I saw her sitting with her eyes closed, taking slow deep breaths and letting them out. She did that for about five minutes, said: "She is near."

I don't know why but I reached for the gun in my pocket, then took it away. Who was I kidding? Hal sat there so quietly, I thought he was asleep. At one point he started cracking his knuckles. I kept darting my eyes back and forth along either side of the road; the waiting was killing me but I wasn't shaking or shivering and that felt pretty good. Maybe I was getting used to meeting ghosts on deserted roads.

When Misti straightened in her seat, she closed her eyes again and said, "She appears." Hal and I looked and, sure enough, saw our friend in the white bloody dress with the flowers beginning to reach the left corner. Misti exited the car first with Hal and I right behind her. Misti took the lead, her arms out in a V shape. She said: "Disturbed spirit, stop."

We were paying her too much for B-movie lines like that.

But it worked. The ghost of Helen Montgomery stopped, turned, and for the first time regarded us with a curiosity that had been lacking before. She opened her mouth and said, "Who are you?"

Misti kept talking. "I bring friends who are here to help you."

"Help - " her voice trailed off, she frowned.

"They need to know what happened to you, Helen."

The ghost hunched her body, drawing the roses close to her chest like a shield; she started crying, continued turning away, then crumpled to the ground, her body shaking with each heavy sob.

Misti dropped to her knees beside Helen and put her hands on her, began telling her it was all right, it was okay, we weren't there to hurt her, but Helen didn't seem to understand. She let out a loud "No!" that seemed to go forever, and Misti tried some more. Hal actually took a step back, and for the first time I wasn't sure if he knew what he was doing. He looked at me with wide eyes, his chest

noticeably moving up and down; all I could do was shrug, and we watched some more.

The ghost's sobs eventually calmed down and Misti kept brushing her hair back from her eyes, making soothing noises. They spoke in whispers, and finally Misti looked up at Hal and I.

"Take my hand," she said, holding out her right hand. "Both of you."

We took a few hesitant steps forward and put our hands on Misti's hand and she said, "Don't let go."

Then Misti closed her eyes and bowed her head and began a chant that I cannot recall. All I remember is that a fog began to envelope us - or my vision began to cloud, I'm not sure which - and when it cleared, we were on the road we were supposed to be on, but in a different spot; the sky had the orange tint of a setting sun. We watched as a car lumbered down the road, the engine groaning and clanking; finally the car pulled over to the shoulder where the front passenger wheel went into a ditch and the car just sat there leaning to one side. The girl who jumped from the car was Helen, her white dress free of blood, her hair tied back. She stood beside the car with her hands on her hips, glaring at the vehicle.

A truck came down the road and Helen turned, waving her arms, but the truck continued past. She said something nasty to the driver and sat against the car, then grabbed her roses from the front seat and started walking.

We followed alongside but weren't walking ourselves, watching the whole thing like it was a movie.

Two more cars drove by within the next few minutes and each time the girl waved but nobody stopped and I wanted to scream at them to come back and help this girl. When the next car that showed up did stop, I felt a chill. It stopped right alongside her, a four-door Packard and the driver leaned across the front seat to roll down the passenger window. Helen stepped up and said, "Hi, I need some help."

"What happened?"

And she went into her routine, the same words she'd spoken to Hal and I.

The guy behind the wheel looked about 20, his thick hair slicked back; he looked freshly shaved and ready for a night on the town. I couldn't see what he was wearing other than a dark jacket. But his eyes betrayed him - they locked onto the girl with an eager gleam that should have warned her off, but I knew they wouldn't.

From beside me I heard Hal say, "I knew it."

The driver said, "Why don't I take a look at the car."

"Sure," Helen said, climbing into the passenger

seat after he opened the door for her. Back to Helen's car we went. The driver hopped out and flashed a lot of teeth as he smiled at her, went to the front of Helen's car, lifted the hood. He looked into the engine compartment and nodded a few times; pressing his lips together. The rest of his attire consisted of black slacks and black shoes - the jacket was zipped to cover his shirt, but the bulge I saw under his left arm as he came around the front of his car told me it was zipped to cover more than his shirt.

She'd come out of the car to stand beside him, still holding the roses.

"Where are you going again?" he said to her.

"The White Chapel Hall."

*It's going to happen, I thought. It's going to happen right here and there's not a thing I can do about it.*

He went back around to the passenger door and opened it. "Hop in, I'll run you over."

She smiled and said thank you very much, adjusting her grip on the roses. As she turned her back to him to get into the car he smacked her on the back of the head. Her head went forward and hit the edge of the car's roof, yelping, turning sharply, her face flushed red in anger, her mouth open; by then he had the knife out, was pushing her into the car despite her kicking and screaming and -

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I couldn't stop shaking. Two hours had passed since we saw what we saw and I couldn't stop shaking. Hal had needed to pull over a few times on our way back to his place and catch his breath, neither of us saying a word, for two reasons:

What we witnessed, of course.

And Misti's last words to us as we dropped her off at her apartment.

*"Tonight you have seen into another world parallel to ours. And she has told you what you must do. Do it wisely. Contact me when you are ready."*

Hal and I sat in his kitchen, at the table; he'd poured us each a big glass of scotch but all I could do was stare at mine and shake.

"Why the hell didn't she warn us?" Hal said, clutching his glass tight. "I've seen some wild stuff in my time but that -"

All I could do was gaze into my drink. When I

looked up, I saw Hal leaning back with his glass to his lips. He downed the liquid in two or three gulps and immediately poured some more.

"Now what, Hal?"

"You still got your gun?"

I nodded.

"You'll need it tomorrow night."

He downed the second drink and poured a third.

"So who was that guy, Hal?" I said.

Hal took a long drink, said, "Tony McNab. Goes by the nickname of Skinner."

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## HAL WILLOCK

**He was the kind of cop they make movies from... when Hal went out to make an arrest, the verdict was in, and the suspect would be brought back dead or alive.**

It was so easy pulling that trigger - but I'm getting ahead of myself.

We went to dinner at a place called the Trocadome the following night, a popular restaurant where the designer obviously liked Roman-style architecture because there were more archways and marble and columns to make you choke; bright lights hung from the dome ceiling and reflected nicely off the white walls, contrasted by the black uniforms worn by the waiters and waitresses.

Hal pointed out a certain man a few tables away who looked a lot older than the man we saw in the vision the previous night, but his hair was still thick and he still wore it slicked back. He still apparently preferred black slacks and black shoes but they looked a little more expensive now. His jacket wasn't buttoned over his white shirt, and there was no bulge under his left arm that I

could detect; otherwise it was the same guy.

The girl with him, a buxom blonde in a tight dress, could either have been a girlfriend or a paid companion; Hal guessed the latter but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was go across to his table, take out my Colt .38 and pump all six slugs into his face. But we had our instructions; we had to do this right.

"Skinner McNab," Hal said. "When we saw him last night he would have been a numbers runner for Mickey Owen. Now Mickey's in the pen and Skinner runs the numbers racket and has punks working for him."

I nodded. I knew Mickey Own, all right - big shot wise guy in Las Palmas who wasn't wise enough to know when the Feds were closing in on him



and by the time he realized they had enough evidence to put him away for thirty years, they'd already slapped the cuffs on him.

Skinner and his girl dined on steak and salad; Hal did the same without the salad, while I worked on cutting up some smoked chicken. But my mind wasn't on the dinner - I chomped a few bones in the process and received some weird looks from Hal each time I pulled the bones out of my mouth. I couldn't help wondering what would happen later.

Hal and I didn't talk much, but I hadn't expected much chatter from him. I knew he wore two guns under his coat, his usual .38 under his arm and a more powerful .45 automatic on his hip. A pair of handcuffs was on his other hip.

I was taking a sip of my coffee and watching Skinner and the girl when she leaned forward and said something; then he leaned forward and slapped her across the face. The slap sounded like a rifle shot and stopped everybody in the room, but a quick glare from Skinner sent everybody back to their meals.

Hal didn't bother to look back; he just shook his head and cut another piece of steak.

"She probably asked him how his dinner was," he said.

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I played with the rope in my hands while Hal watched the entrance of the Trocadome. We'd finished our dinner just as Skinner and his date were getting desert. Hal sat in the driver's seat quietly smoking one cigarette after another.

"Won't be long now," Hal said. But it was the third time he'd said it over the period of an hour.

This time he was right. Skinner and his girl, with a mink stole over her shoulders, walked down the front steps of a Trocadome and waited on the sidewalk while a big black car pulled up in front of them. Hal watched the car, said, "One driver. He'll be armed."

Skinner and the girl piled inside, the car drove off; Hal hit the starter and pulled out into traffic behind Skinner's car.

We drove a few miles and made our move in the middle of an intersection. Hal sped up, switched lanes, came up on the passenger side of Skinner's car and cut in front of it. Skinner's car screeched, smacking into the side of the front of Hal's car. I had my door open before we stopped. Scrambling out onto the street, not aware of anything else around me, I raced around the front of both cars, my eyes on the driver of Skinner's. He had his eyes on me too and a gun halfway out the window when I blasted three rounds through the windshield and into his chest and neck. He slumped back against the seat, letting out a

choked scream, still trying to raise the gun; from the back, I heard the girl scream, a man scream, Hal yelling; I kept moving around to the driver's side of Skinner's car and stroked the trigger of my .38 again. This time the driver stopped moving because the bullet went through the front of his head and exploded out the back.

Hal's rear end and legs were sticking out the back of rear door of the driver's side, his right arm moving back and forth in a punching motion. When I reached him, he had Skinner on his belly on the back seat, snapped the cuffs on him. I helped haul Skinner out. The girl sat slumped in the back seat, unconscious. Hal and I half dragged, half carried Skinner to our car, stuffed him in the back seat. I climbed in back with him. Hal jumped behind the wheel, backed away from Skinner's car, twisted the wheel, and sped across the remainder of the intersection.

I worked the rope around Skinner's ankles, very glad that he was out cold, knowing that if he'd struggled at all I'd be tempted to put the last round of my .38 into *his* head. I wasn't shaking at all, wasn't even sweating.

And I didn't find anything wrong with that at all.

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Hal stopped at a pay phone long enough to call Misti. We sped out to Niles Canyon and Scott's Corner. Misti was already there with the ghost of Helen Montgomery next to her. She had her arm around Helen; the roses had been placed on the ground.

*I'll never forget what happened next.*

Hal and I pulled Skinner from the back seat and dragged him across the blacktop to the middle of the street, dropped him there. Hal knelt down beside him, slapped his cheeks until he woke up. When he did wake up, he went into the usual routine of "Do you know who I am" and "I'll kill you for this" but Hal and I didn't say a word. We cut the ropes from his ankles and helped him to his feet, and by then Misti and Helen had come over.

*And I'll never forget the look on Skinner's face when he saw Helen standing before him.*

His eyes popped open, his mouth dropped open, and his already pale face turned paler. As he spoke he stuttered, but eventually said: "No! You're dead! I killed you!" To Hal and I: "What is this?" He kept talking but it isn't worth repeating, and he didn't talk for much longer, either.

Misti advised Hal and I to stand back and we didn't argue because Helen was suddenly in Skinner's face with her lips pulled back over two rows of sharp teeth and as she grabbed him by the shoulders a cold wind rushed down on us; her hair began whipping back and forth and her eyes

turned to fire. Skinner screamed as Helen grasped him in a tight embrace and the ground shook. Hal, Misti and I hit the pavement - not by choice, we couldn't keep standing. A high-pitched howl pierced our bodies - I certainly felt it in the center of my chest - my whole body turning to ice as I looked at the embracing Helen and Skinner, a white strip of cloud spinning in a coil around them. Skinner's loud scream mixed with the other and then there was flash of blinding light that made me scream and shut my eyes it hurt so much; when I opened them, they were gone.

Gone. That's it. The only evidence anybody having stood there were a pair of black shoes with smoke coming out of them.

The wind died down. The crickets slowly took back the night. Hal and Misti and I stood up and regarded each other with surprise, until Misti smiled.

"You two did good," she said. "Her spirit is free."

Then she turned away, climbed into a car parked on the corner across from us, drove away.

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The kidnapping of Tony "Skinner" McNab was big news for the next week. The cops didn't work very hard at trying to find him, but word on the street said the local gangsters were doing their best and getting nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. As time passed his disappearance turned into a legend of its own.

Shortly after the Encounter at Scott's Corner, as I came to call it, Misti closed up shop and left the city. I never heard from her again.

Hal and I both needed to get away for a while, and we each took separate trips. I wrote all of this down, it was a form of therapy for me. I still couldn't believe it, but I couldn't deny it, either. Finally I just decided that what Misti had told us was right: we witnessed something from another world parallel to ours. There was no other way to say it. I never laughed at ghost stories again.

When Hal and I met after vacation to get back to work on the new book, he couldn't concentrate. He'd spent his break getting every book he could find on the occult, the afterlife, the paranormal - all of it. He wouldn't talk about anything else. He wouldn't put the bottle down, either, as his many drunken late night phone calls to me testified. No

matter how hard I tried - even calling our editor to see if he could talk some sense into Hal - he wouldn't talk about anything else but the spirit world and what it contained. He visited other places that reportedly were haunted but never told me what he found.

I finally became concerned when several days went by without a word from Hal. I went to his apartment, told the super I was concerned about him, and together we went up to his apartment and the super unlocked the door with the master key.

We found Hal in the bedroom, at the foot of his bed; the gun he'd used to shoot himself in the

head had flown out of his hand when he pulled the trigger, but the bullet had done the job. A spilled bottle of scotch lay near his left hand. His eyes were still open, and I think he wanted it that way, because the note I found on his desk said:

I NEED TO SEE FOR MYSELF.

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I don't know what Hal saw, but I hoped it was what he wanted. I have a strong feeling that he was looking for his wife.

He was Skinner's last victim, I guess. I drove out to Scott's Corner at least once or twice a month for the next two years after Hal's suicide, but

I never saw Helen again. I visited her grave at the cemetery, but only twice - each time I set foot in front of her headstone, a cold wind brushed the back of my neck.

I moved on to other writing assignments, moved on with my life; married a beautiful woman, even raised a couple of kids. There were times when my wife caught me staring out into the night. She'd ask me what I was thinking, what was wrong, but I couldn't find the words to tell her.

I still dreamt of those terrible nights - the one when Helen died, the one when she had her revenge. If I'd known what would have happened when Hal and I first saw her, like I said in the beginning, I would have run away. Far away. Listen to my warning - ghosts and spirits exist; that's all you need to know. Messing with them is a one-way ticket to heartache. ☹



art for Together They Die by Katey Ashcraft



# Captain Zack Brass versus the Space Vampires

by Martin Scribbler

*In the distant future, man will head into space to answer the ultimate question: Is there life among the stars? It may be that the most terrifying answer is "No."*

## PART ONE

"Ten space leagues to the Devil's Squall, Captain."

"I can see it, ensign. The countdown won't be necessary." For the past twelve hours, the Devil's Squall, a stellar nebula of shifting green and silver tendrils, had loomed ever larger through the glassteel of the fore viewport. Comprised of countless glowing particles, it was an awesome and beautiful sight to behold. Captain Jeremiah Goddard gripped the wheel of his vessel tighter, its chrome becoming slick with his sweat. Though fifty ships or more had travelled this route safely in the last decade, and though he himself had

captained six of them, he knew that three colony ships and two long-range scouts had gone inexplicably missing in its roiling mists. No distress call was ever received by a human outpost. No emergency buoy was ever recovered. They simply disappeared without a trace, and over five thousand passengers and crew disappeared with them.

Like all nebulas, the Devil's Squall was a collection of dust and fragments of whatever star had exploded to form it. But unlike many, it was alight with a phosphorescent glow and within it, an invisible storm raged. Electromagnetic currents rippled among the particles, whirling and eddying in places, buffeting and tugging at any ship that

dared to pass through. Even from this distance, he could feel the nebula's thrumming in the steel of his rocket's deck.

Yes, it was a mysterious region his ship, The Star Argosy, hurtled towards; it was whispered about among spacers and said by some to be haunted. A funny thought that, in this age where rocketships plied the vast distances between stars. Science had given man the power to conquer the black void of night and yet the spectres and bugaboos trailed after, lurked and plotted evil even in alien darknesses. The ghost story lingered.

Despite all this — the tales, the invisible currents, its reputation for danger — the scientists of Rocket Patrol had declared the Devil's Squall harmless. They produced charts and tables to show that its turbulence made piloting challenging but not impossible, and that its electrical forces could not damage the hull of even the weakest ships in the fleet. They claimed the lost vessels were likely the result of a series of tragic but fluke occurrences, muttered the phrase "pilot error" among themselves, and designated the nebula a Hazard Class E. All claims to the contrary were dismissed as spacer superstition.

Captain Goddard knew better than to discount spacer superstition out of hand, but even though he heeded the stories he'd heard, his experiences with the Squall couldn't contradict the pronouncements of science. In every one of his six trips through, he had experienced nothing more out of the ordinary than some turbulence and electrical interference. Neither of these were problems he hadn't faced before, and admittedly he'd seen far worse in other, more treacherous, regions of the galaxy. Certainly, if pressed, he couldn't deny that the Devil's Squall appeared harmless. But that didn't change the fact that whenever he watched those mists encircle the Star Argosy, a cold fear would grip his heart, squeeze damp out through his palms.

"I'll address the ship now, Jenkins. Cut the music," he said.

The ship's purser turned to a series of machines that were concerned with monitoring and maintaining the comfort of the passengers. He turned a dial on one of them, then lifted the stylus from a rotating, platinum cylinder. "All set, Cap'n."

Goddard cleared his throat as he flicked a switch on the console above him. He pulled down a flexible, rubber tube and spoke into the little brass trumpet on its end. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, for the interruption in our program of popular musical entertainments. This is your Captain speaking." His voice was smooth and reassuring; the words he spoke, practised. There was no way that the wealthy, cultured passengers who

heard this announcement, each of whom had paid over a hundred thousand earth dollars to book passage on the Star Argosy, would know that the man who spoke to them was an aging and weathered space dog. "In about thirty space minutes, our ship will enter the Emerald Fog, a most resplendent example of interstellar vivacity. Renowned throughout this region of the galaxy for its sparkling beauty, the Emerald Fog is the floating remnant of an exploded star.

"You will note that as we pass through the Emerald Fog, the ship's lighting will dim and we may experience some shaking in the hull. This is all perfectly normal and absolutely nothing to worry yourselves over. The turbulence is no more severe than you would experience in a boat on a windy day back on Earth. But if you do find yourself suffering from the spacer equivalent of seasickness — 'space sickness,' we call it..." Pause, two, three, four. Allow them a moment to laugh. "Please be assured that this too is perfectly normal and will pass soon. If you have any other concerns or questions about interstellar clouds, please feel free to seek out one of our stewards.

"Those of you not already in the ballroom, I would encourage to make your way there so that you may observe this extraordinary phenomena through our sturdy, glassteel observation windows. And as our shipboard address system will suffer some slight static while we're in the cloud, Perry Stardust and the Far Side of the Moon Orchestra will be performing a special selection of light favorites to accompany this marvellous sight. The whole galaxy is putting on a show tonight especially for you, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you will enjoy it."

He flicked off the address system, and slid the speaker-trumpet back into its holder.

"Poor lubbers," said an ensign at the navigation console. "Haven't got a clue what we're heading into."

"And it's our job to make sure they never find out," said Captain Goddard. "Now get your green-horn hide away from that station. Consider yourself relieved."

"But... Cap'n, I didn't mean..."

"Didn't nothing. We have to get every reading we can out of the astro-naviscope before the Squall eels up our instruments, so I'm taking our bearings myself. I'm not leaving the lives of twelve-hundred lubbers in the hands of a swab navigator, no matter who his daddy is. Understood?"

"Aye, Sir." The ensign stood at attention, his face red with humiliation.

"And seeing as you're so concerned about what the lubbers on this ship do and don't know," continued the Captain, "you can work out the rest of

your shift among the stewards. Jenkins, see that this man is outfitted properly.”

“Aye, Sir,” said the purser who motioned for the ensign to follow and the two of them marched across the bridge and exited it through a hatch. The rest of the crew was silent for a moment then returned to their duties. A few of the more seasoned officers even sniggered at the recruit’s misfortune.

Though he much preferred to stand at the wheel and steer the ship himself, Captain Goddard relinquished the helm to his pilot and busied himself at the astro-naviscope. He knew he probably shouldn’t have come down so hard on the ensign, especially considering he normally he didn’t mind a little levity on the bridge. This was just a colony ship afterall, not a war rocket. But still, those passengers paid the crew’s salaries and for that, they deserved to be spoken of with respect. And as he stared into the green glow of the scope, he tried to kid himself that this was why he’d acted so severely. The truth was he always chewed somebody out just before entering the Devil’s Squall. It helped him relax.

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“Ahh, ladies and gentlemen,” said Perry Stardust. He held the microphone as though it were actually working, but they were already well into the Emerald Fog and would only get screeches and howls if they tried to use the amplification equipment. “That was ‘How Deep is the Ocean’ featuring the very talented Mr Dale Scots on the clarinet.” Polite applause came up to him from the sea of tuxedos and gold and silver evening dresses. The ship lurched slightly and the dancers made a collective “Whoa!” noise then laughed. They were having a grand time despite the turbulence. Or perhaps because of it. They had no idea how difficult it was for sixteen musicians to stay in tempo when the floor was rolling around like this. Just as well. He looked out across the heads at the broad expanse of glassteel that formed the far wall of the ballroom. It gave a panoramic view of the glowing, green mists of the nebula. A glorious sight. And a pity he’d never really had a chance to watch it go by. It would take the Star Argosy six hours to cross and the orchestra would play for most of that time. A real test of endurance, this.

“Ahhh, I see the Emerald Fog is putting on a dazzling show for us tonight. What do you say boys, we play along with a little ‘Moonlight is for Lovers’?” The musicians nodded with practiced enthusiasm at his question. He swung his baton in an andante rhythm and one, two, three, his boys started to play. They were a little trembly he had to admit, but not bad. Not bad, all things con-

sidered.

A few bars went by and Perry Stardust turned to face the audience, smiling as he drew his trumpet from under his left arm. Waited for his cue. Bided his time. Watched the tuxes and the silk gowns turn below him. The only light he had to see by came from the candles on the tables and streamed in from the Emerald Fog, and while together they were bright enough to fill the room, the thin, phosphorescence of the nebula gave the dancers’ skin a grey tint. He fancied they looked like sea creatures, a school of gayly dressed minnows milling about in the shallows.

Across the dance floor he saw that some kind of commotion was brewing. It was right on the edge of the ballroom, near the door. An officer was there who stood tall, caught Perry’s eye and gave him the ‘play louder’ signal.

Poor guy. It’s not all dress uniforms and smiles for the stewards. Somebody over there has probably been sick. What a mess.

Could be worse than being the band leader, he reminded himself. Much worse.

Perry Stardust brought his trumpet to his lips and blew a happy melody. Blew it as loud as he could.

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A crackle blasted through a speaker, loud enough that it caused the entire bridge crew to start. It settled into a static growl over which a voice could just barely be heard.

“Turn that blasted thing down! What durned fool is using the intercom system while we’re in the middle of the Squall?” shouted Captain Goddard. “Phipps! The helm!” He stepped from behind the wheel of the ship, handing it off to the pilot, and rushed across the bridge to the communications station. He rested a hand on the shoulder of the lieutenant who was seated there before a rack of radio equipment and adjusting a series of dials. The communications officer had managed to reduce the riot of noise to a manageable level, but while an anxious voice was audible through it, the sense of the message was hopelessly garbled.

“Did you catch any of that?” the Captain asked him.

“No sir. Sorry sir.”

Goddard flipped a switch on the console, pulled a retractable hose from its housing and shouted slowly and clearly into the brass mouthpiece: “Say again! Louder! Over!” and waited.

There was a moment where only the electrical bedlam of the nebula’s interference was audible, and then, all ears straining to make it out, came a slow, shouted reply:

“Old!... Scratch!... Is!... Loose!”

And then, for a moment, there was only the crackle of the loudspeaker.

Goddard ran a palm across his face, making his brow only damper, then flicked off the speaker control. The bridge was silent and the twelve officers of the bridge crew were clearly alarmed. All eyes were on their Captain.

"Where did that come from?" he asked.

"Area G. Section 16," said the communications officer who was pointing at a lone, orange light among a matrix of tiny bulbs. It flickered a moment longer then winked out.

"Bowels of the ship," Goddard muttered as he straightened. From the leather holster at his hip, he drew his electro-pistol and removed the safety. He addressed his crew gruffly: "Alright. You all heard the message. Gather the emergency detail on the double." Five of his men left the bridge to grab equipment, while the remainder busied themselves at their stations.

"I'll lead the team myself," he said. "Phipps, you're in command while I'm gone." The ship rolled dramatically down, forcing him to grab ahold of a handrail for support. "And mind our pitch, Phipps. We'll need it as steady as you can keep it."

He holstered his weapon and from under his shirt, drew a key that dangled on a long chain. He inserted it into a slot in a panel above the ship's wheel and turned it. A small, glass door sprung open next to it, revealing a button the size of his thumb. He pressed it, withdrew the key and walked off the bridge without saying a word to the men who remained behind.

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"Old Scratch is loose." The code words told Captain Goddard only one thing: something had gone horribly wrong aboard the *Star Argosy*, and they were now very probably facing the unknown doom that had claimed five ships and five thousand souls in the Devil's Squall. It was the message of last resort. To be used only when they were on the very brink of Hell itself.

But with no more detail than this, Goddard found himself working his way through the narrow passages in the depths of the rocket, jogging between steam pipes and electrical conduits, with a small cadre of his most trusted men: two doctors, two engineers, a science expert, and a hardy spacer named Donato whose only expertise was knowing how to survive in the black vacuum between the stars. He had to trust that on the decks above, the emergency measures were being carried out as written. The stewards would be gathering the passengers together and shepherding them toward the core of the rocket. Other crew members would be sealing all the hatches between

sections and putting up shield plates over the external windows. And on the bridge, his officers would be preparing to ignite the bulk of their remaining fuel in one enormous rocket burst, the hope being that this would be enough to carry them out of the Devil's Squall and away from whatever it was that threatened them. But first he had to find out what the danger was specifically, and if he didn't get word back in twenty space minutes, the blast would be initiated without his authorization.

Of course, he took little comfort from knowing all this. These were the same emergency measures that would have been used by the last colony ship to meet its demise in the nebula.

Six space minutes had already passed, and they were just reaching section G-16—the *Star Argosy* was a big rocket. Goddard was in the lead as they stepped through the hatchway, walked down an iron catwalk then descended a narrow ladder. The air was hot and thick with steam, and down here, the ship's lighting had failed completely. But, as even portable electrical equipment couldn't be relied upon, the group had to carry aloft magnesium torches which gave off a foul-smelling smoke and burned so bright in their centres they stabbed at the eyes and left trailing dots of red and purple if you inadvertantly looked at them.

As they ran down a passageway between a row of giant boilers, the clanging of their boots against the metal deck must have alerted someone to their presence. From the far end of the section, they heard a scream, "Help! Here! I'm down here! Hurry!"

"Who is that?" asked Doctor Barnhoff.

"Not sure," replied Captain Goddard. "But it sounds like he's at the engineering station."

The group raced through the maze of machinery and presently emerged in a open area, but something was wrong. Great gouts of steam were flooding the space and the light of their torches reflected off the clouds, reducing visibility to only a few feet. They had to slow to a walk, and cautiously follow the man's screams. They found him splayed out on the floor next to an intercomm device, clutching the speaking-tube with his left hand while his right was pressed to his throat. He wore the uniform of an ensign, its leather torn, and stained red. The flesh of his neck had clearly been shredded. Blood seeped from between his fingers.

"Let me at 'im," said Doctor Barnhoff, who dropped to a knee next to injured crewman and opened his medkit.

"Frakes. Norris," said the Captain to the engineers. "See if you can do something about this steam. But be careful." Then he knelt next to the

ensign. "What was it, son?"

The doctor pulled the man's hand from his throat, but an artery must have been cut. A jet of blood shot from the man's neck. Sprayed the Captain's face with gore.

"Darn it," spat Doctor Barnhoff as he smacked a wad of steril gauze against the wound, staunching the flow. "We're going to have to sew this up, Jack," he said to the other medic.

Goddard wiped his face and looked down into the terrified eyes of the man. His face was growing pale from loss of blood. Shock was clearly setting in. He had to get him to talk before he faded.

"Come on, son. What happened here?"

"It was him!" the man shrieked. "Old Scratch is loose! Old Scratch! We're all dead, Captain! All dead!"

"Old Scratch? But what does that mean, son?"

"The Devil himself! Old Scratch! Here, Captain! All dead! All dead..." the ensign's screams petered out. His eyes rolled back in their sockets. He went limp.

Doctor Barnhoff pushed Goddard aside.

"Is he...?" the Captain asked.

"Just passed out. Now let me tend to this man."

The steam was starting to dissipate, and as Goddard looked around he could see the rest of the emergency detail working among the pipes that coursed through this section. They must have found the leak and stopped it. He looked down at his watch. It was powered by trusty clockwork, and still ticked off the seconds. He had nine space minutes to sort out this mess and get word up to the bridge before the fuel was ignited.

Melville, his science officer, came over. "Somebody opened all the steam valves, sir. Lines were venting all over the place, but I think we've got most of them."

"Good," said Goddard.

"What was he doing down here?"

The Captain motioned towards a pair of mops and a spilt pail. "Cleaning detail, most likely."

"Where are the rest of them, then?"

"All dead I expect."

"He wasn't serious, you think? Old Scratch? That's just a code. Spacer slang."

"Somebody attacked this man," said Goddard.

"Captain, we have a problem!" shouted Frakes, one of his engineers. He was standing at a systems-monitoring station.

Goddard joined him. "What is it?"

"Look at this reading." Frakes pointed at a glass window. Behind it, a roll of graph paper scrolled past on which a thin pen scratched a horizontal line.

"That should be moving side to side. This meter just reads zero," said Frakes.

"Is the Squall interfering with it's machinery?" asked Melville.

The engineer shook his head. "No. It's powered by air pressure from the line."

"Then..." the Captain stepped back and examined the system this station monitored. "Oh no," he said as he realized where they were standing. "Can you turn it back on?"

"Maybe. If I can find where the damage is."

"What is it?" asked Melville.

"Life support," said the engineer. "This shunts heat off the rocket and back into the fuselage. Right now, everything's bleeding off into space. Once these boilers go cold, we may as well be a meat locker."

"How long do we have?" the Captain asked of the science officer.

Melville ran a few calculations in his head. "The hull still conducts heat as long as the rockets are firing, but it won't be enough to keep us alive. Figure, three hours at normal burn. But only one after an emergency flame-out."

"Quick, Melville," said the Captain as he checked his watch again. "We've got five minutes. Get on the intercomm and try to call off that burn. Jack," he hollered to the medic who was assisting Barnhoff with the injured ensign. "He only needs one sawbones. You high-tail it back up to the bridge and do the same in person in case we can't get through."

"Do what?" Jack said.

"Call off that burn! And run!"

The two men dashed off.

"Cap!" It was Donato. He was one of Goddard's oldest friends and now his Executive Officer. They were both old spacers who'd enlisted young and worked their way up the ranks the hard way. "Take a look at this," Don continued. He was standing against a boiler, lighting a cigarette.

Goddard went over. "Yeah?" he said. Don jerked his thumb at the side of the massive iron cylinder. On it, scrawled in blood was a message. It read: "Nighty-night."

"And Norris found your other janitor," Don said as he pointed upward.

Above them on a catwalk, Norris stood. He held aloft his torch to reveal a body dangling upsidedown from the pipes that ran along the ceiling. The dead ensign's eyes were wide open, his mouth gaped, and for his chin to hang at that angle his neck must have been severed half-way through. On his hands he still wore yellow, rubber cleaning gloves.

"He's bled dry," Norris shouted to them.

Goddard looked down. There wasn't a spot of blood on the floor beneath the body.

Don took a drag off his smoke, and smiled grimly.



"Next time," he said. "We spend the extra month and go around the Devil's Squall. Okay?"

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"Anything useful from the astro-naviscope, lieutenant?"

"I may as well be reading random numbers, Captain."

"Good. Good. And Cadet Pep. What's the word on the lights?"

A youth in the green uniform of a Rocket Patrol student stood just inside the bridge hatchway. He was still panting from racing about from deck to deck. "I sampled five different sections," he said. "Lighting ranged from a thirty-five percent reduction in brightness on upper decks to a full ninety percent reduction on the uninsulated levels."

"Excellent. Perfect."

The ship began to roll severely down and to the left, forcing the bridge crew to grab on to rails or chairs for support.

"Whoa there, pilot! Reign it in there a bit. We can assume they were trying to fight the currents, not getting tossed about like a cork in the ocean. They were civilian spacers, but I'm sure they weren't complete incompetents."

"Aye sir, Captain Brass, sir. Sorry, sir," said the pilot as he spun the pitch control and steadied the ship.

"This is terrific," said Captain Zackery Brass. "Thrilling." He smiled. Their rocket had launched from a super-secret base in Greenland over twelve weeks ago and so far this had been a completely uneventful journey. He was glad to have the monotony broken up.

"How about you, Cadet Pep? What do you think of your first mission with Rocket Patrol?"

"Well, gee. I guess..."

"What is it Pep?"

"Well, aren't you worried that maybe what happened to the Star Argosy will happen to us?"

"That's precisely what I'm hoping for. It'll be easier to find them if we experience the same things they did. That's why we're letting a rocket crewed by some of the best trained Bluejackets in the Patrol pitch and roll around like this."

"So we're just going to float about in the Devil's Squall and hope we get lucky?"

"Oh, not just that. Maybe it's time to unveil step two." Captain Brass smiled. "Murray," he said to his second-in-command. "Time?"

From a pocket in the blue leather jacket from which this elite squad of spacers got their name, he drew a silver, clockwork pocket watch. "Seventeen thirty on the space clock," he said.

"Well, I think we've been in here long enough let's start her up."

Captain Brass got out of his command chair and went over to a little hatch in the floor that led to the deck below. He spun the wheel on it, popped it open then looked down. "Wensley!" he shouted down into the hole. "Light it!" And then he sealed the hatch back up.

"Come on Pep, let's go watch this." He led the cadet to the fore part of the bridge and stood under the broad dome of the glassteel viewport. The sound of gears turning, of metal grinding against metal, filled the cabin. And as the noise droned on, a long antennae-like projection slowly extended out from the front of the rocket and became visible through the window.

"Since we don't have much electrical," said the Captain, "Wensley and his men are having to crank that out by hand. It's pretty laborious, but if this work's..."

"What is it?" asked Cadet Pep.

"Do you know the story of Hansel and Gretel, Cadet?"

"Of course."

"Remember how they left a trail of breadcrumbs in the forest so they could find their way home. Well, the first thing the Captain of the Star Argosy should have done when he knew he was in trouble was set up his own trail of breadcrumbs. Only this is a special trail that can only be seen under certain circumstances. You see, we don't want any crows coming along and scooping up our breadcrumbs like they did in Hansel and Gretel. So this is a chemical trail the Argosy left, and it can only be seen in the presence of a special light. A light that this antennae will give off. Watch."

Presently, the projection stopped extending, and the cadet noticed that the tip of it ended in a cup-like shape. From this he saw a blinding flash as a substance was ignited, and then it settled into a bright yellow glow.

"Look! Over there cadet," said the Captain as he pointed off through the glassteel to a point several hundred yards off their port side. "There it is, your trail of breadcrumbs."

There in the distance, clearly visible against the green and grey mists of the Devil's Squall there was a thin trail that looked very much like red smoke frozen in place. It seemed to start with a little blob on the end nearest them, then travel a long ways on the same trajectory as their own ship. But then strangely, it veered sharply down and to the starboard and disappeared in the roiling chaos of the nebula.

This development clearly excited the Captain. "Hocks," he said to his pilot, "follow that red strip."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE... ♀



# Lady Arcane: the Mistress of Magic

by Ron Fortier (with special thanks to Christopher Mills\*)

Laurel Lye, ace crime reporter for the Port Nocturne Eclipse, snatched a shrimp topped cracker from the passing silver tray and took a greedy bite.

It wasn't every day a hard working, city girl was invited to the home of millionaire steel magnate, Harlan S. O'Malley. The occasion was the public announcement of the old boy's forthcoming nuptials.

O'Malley, the father of two grown children, had lost his wife of twenty-five years to pneumonia three years earlier. Her death had wounded the tough, business lion and for a time he seques-

tered himself in his fifty-room mansion located on a two hundred acre estate along the coast just south of the town line.

Then, six short months ago, Maude Crimpton, who wrote the Ask Aunt Maude column for the Eclipse, announced that several sources reported seeing the widower making the rounds of Port Nocturne's fancier dives. On his arm at these sightings was a buxom, vivacious blonde young enough to be his daughter. Tongues started wagging and the gossip columns were filled with innuendos.

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\* Port Nocturne, home of Femme Noir, Brother Grim and now Lady Arcane, is the creation of Christopher Mills, aka the Crimeboss. For more pulp adventures on the rain slick streets of the city where justice is... blonde... be sure to check out [www.supernaturalcrime.com](http://www.supernaturalcrime.com).

The blonde turned out to be Sandra Delight, an exotic dancer who headlined the marquee at the Boom-Boom Club as Miss Sunny Delight. How she and the wealthy O'Malley crossed path was vague, but irrelevant. The meeting had occurred and now the saucy dancer had her gold-digging claws anchored in his heart.

Soon their photos together began appearing on the front page of every major daily in the city. By her expensive clothes, it was obvious that the rejuvenated old duffer was lavishing lots of money on his new paramour.

Then came the party invitation to the mansion, where, in front of a select group of family, friends, the official wedding plans would be made known. Unfortunately, depending on your vantage point, the invite came the day after Maude awoke to find herself covered with tiny red spots. The diagnosis was German measles and she was confined to a minimum of five days bed rest.

Since the party was too big an event to ignore, city editor Joe Capshaw, drafted Lye to fill-in for the social maven. At first Laurel stamped her foot, pouted her pretty lips and started to make some snide utterances on her being demeaned by such a frivolous waste of her valuable time.

When Capshaw explained the gig was at the O'Malley mansion, where a sumptuous gourmet meal would be served, followed by an evening of live entertainment, Lye shut her mouth. She snatched up the five by seven card and dashed out of the office, her mind awl with what she would wear to such a fancy shindig.

That had been six hours ago. Now she was nonchalantly mingling her way through the press of Port Nocturne's elite trying her best to fit in. The strapless, black gown she wore was both striking and simple. It was the only decent dress she had. She accentuated it with silver costume jewelry to include a necklace, matching earrings and a small handbag with a silver clasp. It couldn't compare with the real gems she saw on the matrons and debutantes all around her, but hopefully no one would bother to look that close.

Finishing the delicious shrimp canope, Lye took a small notebook and pencil from her purse and began scribbling notes. She wanted her story to include a partial list of some of the dignitaries present. There were political officials, sport figures and foreign visitors parading about in turbans and brightly colored kaftans. She wouldn't have been surprised to see the President walk through the front door. O'Malley was that important a personage.

"Ah, Miss Lye, I see you are hard at work earning your pay."

Pulling on his thin mustache with one hand

while holding a martini with the other, Edgar Nyby, beamed at her with an employer's smugness. Nyby was the owner-publisher of the Eclipse.

"I'm doing my best, Mr. Nyby."

"Not exactly crimes and robbers, is it Lye?"

"No, sir it isn't. But then again, I don't mind a little peace and quiet either."

A young man and woman, both with tanned skin and light brown hair had come up at Nyby's elbow and now he remembered their presence.

"Oh, excuse my manners. Miss Laurel Lye, allow me to introduce you to Chris and Connie O'Malley. Harlan O'Malley is their father."

Upon hearing their names, the veteran newshound immediately recognized the handsome siblings. Both of them had been photographed almost as much as their famous father. They all shook hands.

"So, how do you feel about your father's remarking?" she asked, sensing a story in the awkward look both brother and sister shared.

"How would you feel, Miss Lye, if you saw your father being fleeced like some country bumpkin at the fair?" Chris's venom was undiluted.

"Chris, please!" Connie pleaded. "You promised, not tonight."

"So you really think Miss Delight is only after your father's money? Is that it?" Lye held her pencil like a duelist about to lunge.

"Why else would he have the family attorney present?" Chris continued, keeping his eyes from his sister who appeared on the verge of tears.

"Huh," Lye cocked her head, pushing her glasses up her nose. "Did I miss something here?"

"Chris, please don't. This is family business. Don't air it like dirty laundry for the whole world to see." Connie sniffled and took hold of his arm.

"Oh, very well," he acquiesced giving her the handkerchief from his tuxedo pocket. "But it will all come out after tonight. She's going to ruin him, Connie, and we all know it."

Connie O'Malley wiped her cheeks and dried her eyes.

She looked at the reporter shyly. "Please forgive us, Miss Lye. We love our father very much and this is all so... so strange to us."

"No apologies necessary, Miss O'Malley. Really."

"God, but I could use a another drink," Chris confessed. "If you'll excuse us, Edgar. Miss Lye."

As the two walked off, Lye scratched a few more notes on her pad. Nyby shook his head. "Careful what you put down. I don't want us being sued for slander."

"Don't worry, sir. These are just notes. Tell me, what was that about O'Malley's lawyer being here tonight?"

"Chris believes Harlan is going to have his will

changed before the wedding. Making his new wife the primary beneficiary to his entire holdings."

"Ouch," Lye groaned. "I can see why the kid was angry. It sounds like he and his sister will be getting the shaft once the new Mrs. O'Malley moves in."

"Maybe, but again, none of this is for print."

Reporter and publisher locked eyes.

"Yet."

"Gotcha."

Just then the volume of patter coming from the front entrance to the great hall seemed to swell with excitement.

Both looked over the heads of their fellow guests to see whose arrival had caused so much commotion.

"Holy smokes!" a young man exclaimed to his brunette companion. "It's Lady Arcane, the stage magician!"

Sure enough, Lye spotted the new center of attention as she stood in the foyer handing the butler her top hat. Arlene Kane was dressed in her familiar all-white, formal tuxedo. The only exception from her stage regalia was instead of black fishnet stockings covering her curvaceous legs, she had on matching trousers to her jacket. Her high heels were of a complementary ivory hue.

The dramatic logic for the woman's fashion was the dazzling counterpoint achieved by her long tresses of vibrant orange. Miss Kane was a fiery redhead with sea-green eyes and a face reminiscent of classical, European beauties. Haughty high cheekbones and a small mouth beneath a slender, Roman nose. She was the child of a Scottish-Irish father and an Italian Countess reputedly descended from the Borgias.

She was admired on the circuit as the finest female prestidigitator in the world and had been a protégé, for many years, of Frank Chandler; better known as Chandu.

"I didn't know we were going to see a magic show?" Laurel said as she came up to the daringly garbed woman.

"Laurel Lye! How good to see you again." The magician extended her hand. "It's been what... three years since you interviewed me?"

"You've a good memory," the reporter complimented, taking her hand. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"Yes. I'm performing at the Orpheum Palace for a two-week run. It's always good to be back in Port Nocturne."

"That's right, you were brought up here."

"Yes, when dad wasn't dragging mother and I all over the bloody globe."

The women were walking past the wide staircase when another voice rang out from above.

"Arlene Kane! Is that you?"

Descending the stairs was the corpulent figure of Harlan O'Malley. He was a burly man, tall with a Santa Clause face that included rosy cheeks, a bulbous nose and a neatly trim, snow-white beard. Hanging on his left arm, was a blonde woman dressed in a sequin red gown that hugged her voluptuous figure like flypaper. Her melon shaped breasts seemed barely contained in the tight bodice.

Sandra Delight glittered with jewelry to include a diamond neck choker, three-inch earrings and a studded bracelet that could blind a person if seen in daylight.

None of it was of the costume variety, Lye deduced, watching the couple descend towards them. She also thought they were the most mis-matched pair she had ever seen. The rich old tycoon and his painted, platinum floozy.

It was also clear that O'Malley and Lady Arcane were more than acquaintances. The smile on the old man's face was radiant as he reached the bottom step and greeted her.

"It is so good to see you again, my dear."

Kane came up and kissed him on the cheek. "Likewise, sir. It's been too long."

"So, where's Gil off to these days?"

The question referred to Arlene's father. Gilbert Kane was a professor of archeology.

"He's in the jungles of Hildago with Clark Savage. Savage thinks there's some kind of lost city down there."

"Hmmp," O'Malley made a face. "That man's a reckless adventurer. Next time you talk with Gil, tell him I said to be careful of the company he keeps."

"Ha, I'll do that, sir. Although I doubt he'll listen."

"Harly, dear," the blonde interrupted. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

O'Malley chuckled. "Oh, forgive me, my dear. How rude of me."

He turned to Arlene just as Laurel took up a position beside the magician. No sense passing up an opportunity to meet the subject matter of her story.

"I'm Laurel Lye," she blurted. "A reporter for the Eclipse."

"Ah, I see," O'Malley nodded, clearly disconcerted to find himself suddenly surrounded by three beautiful women.

"Thank you for coming to our little soiree."

"My pleasure, Mr. O'Malley. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"Ahem," Sandra nudged him again.

"Oh, right. My dear, Miss Lye of the...ah..?"

"The Eclipse," Laurel provided again.

"Yes, of course. A reporter for the Eclipse. And this charming lady in white is Arlene Kane, the daughter of my very good friend, Professor Gilbert Kane. Better known as..."

"I know, snookums, she's Lady Arcane." Sandra smiled at Kane. "I saw you once when I was in Boston. I'm in show business too."

"So I've heard," Kane replied politely.

"I'm a dancer...oh, I mean, I was a dancer. Right, sugar-cheeks."

O'Malley actually blushed. "Indeed, my dear." He straightened up, swelled his chest and addressed his lovely guests. "Miss Delight and I were married this afternoon. She is now Mrs. Harlan O'Malley."

"Holy smokes!" Lye gasped. "What a scoop. I thought the point of this whole party was to announce your engagement."

"Ah, well, yes." O'Malley elaborated. "That was our original intent. But Sandy thought it would be silly to wait and so we simply went to City Hall and voila. Just like that."

The big man turned and gave his new wife a loud kiss.

"She's made me the happiest man in the world."

"Darn it," Lye whispered to Kane. "Should have thought to bring along a shutter-bug."

"Father!" Chris O'Malley came storming through the assembled crowd, his sister and a bespectacled gentlemen, following in his wake.

"Ah, Chris, my boy. Look who's here. It's Gil Kane's daughter, Arlene."

Young O'Malley rudely ignored the dazzling conjurer. His entire demeanor was that of heated outrage. Anger tainted his voice.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Did you really do it? Did you marry this..." the son was having trouble speaking clearly. He jabbed a finger at the buxom blonde clinging to his father. "...trollp!"

An awkward silence fell over the great hall, as everyone within hearing range ceased chattering. All eyes were directed towards the confrontation taking place. Lye was mentally jotting down specifics she would hopefully be able to recall when writing her piece. Two of these details were identifying the man behind young Christian as attorney Porter Kincaid and the second was finally noticing the obscenely huge diamond ring Sandy was wearing over her gloved hand. It had escaped her attention earlier because of all the other gems the woman was flashing.

"That will be enough!" Old man O'Malley belted at his heir. "You will not insult the woman I love! Ever! In this house or anywhere else for that matter!"

"Father," Connie O'Malley played the peacemaker, as she stepped in front of her out-of-control sibling. "This is neither the time nor place for this!"

"She's right," Sandy chimed in. "Darling, if Chris is determined to air all of this, we should really do it in private. Like in the library?"

"Quite right, my dear." O'Malley stepped up to his son, his face still rigid. "This is a private, family matter. Please!"

Suddenly realizing he was the center of what had become a three-ring circus, Chris O'Malley nervously shuffled his feet. "Very well, but we are still having this out once and for all!"

"As you wish." O'Malley raised his arm and indicated the open door to the library at the far wall. "After you."

Connie took her brother's arm, before he could change his mind, and led him away.

"You'd best come along, Porter," O'Malley suggested. "We may have need of you in there."

"As you wish, Harlan."

Sandy took two quick steps and reconnected herself to her husband's arm and gave it a little squeeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen," O'Malley said, addressing his guests. "Please forgive this embarrassing incident and continue to enjoy yourselves. I'm sure dinner will be ready shortly and we will be joining you there directly."

"Again, my deepest apologies."

As the couple and the lawyer moved off, several people in the crowd offered supportive remarks. Although a powerful figure in city affairs, O'Malley was also a fair and generous man much admired and respected by his friends and associates. They were honestly sympathetic with his situation.

"Poor Harlan," Kane commented to Lye. "I hope they can work this out."

Laurel was listening to Lady Arcane while keeping her focus on the departing trio. Just as they were about to enter the library, the new Mrs. O'Malley signaled a passing waiter and gave him instructions. The man nodded and hustled off to the bar. As he passed the reporter and the magician, Lye thought he looked familiar.

"Huh?" she finally said, realizing Kane was staring at her. "What did you say?"

"I simply said I was sorry Harlan and his son were at odds. He's a good man and deserves to be happy."

"And you think that bleached bimbo can do that?"

"My, my, but you're certainly cynical."

"She's a stripper, lady. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"Well, it is difficult to miss. But that doesn't necessarily make her an evil witch."

Lye shook her head in wonder. "Either you are pulling my leg, or you are lots more open minded than most people I know."

"I'd like to believe I'm the latter. But come along, I see the butler is announcing dinner. Shall we go?"

"You bet. I'm famished."

As the two began heading towards the main dining room, they were joined Edgar Nyby. Lye introduced him to Lady Arcane.

"That was quite the little blow-up, wasn't it?" he asked, referring to the duel of words everyone had witnessed.

"Amen to that," Lye concurred. She saw Nyby's expression and added, "I know. Be careful what I write down. Trust me, boss, I've no intention of making up any kind of scandal. That's not how I work."

"Excellent. Now let's get in there and eat. I hear Harlan's chef has prepared a special French version of glazed duck."

People filed into the spacious dining area, where two long tables were elaborately decorated with the finest linens and china. Lye envisioned a scene out of a legendary Henry the Eighth banquet. One by one the cream of Port Nocturne society took their seats.

Nyby, a well-mannered soul, was pulling out two chairs for his lady companions when someone suddenly shouted from the doorway.

"Somebody call the police!" It was the waiter Lye had seen go after a drink for Mrs. O'Malley. Now, empty tray at his side, he stood against the door-frame, his face ashen.

"What is it, man?" Nyby inquired.

"It's Mr. O'Malley! He's been murdered!"

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Chief of Detectives, Rod Riley took his handkerchief and wrapped it around the hunting knife still in the Medical Examiner's gloved hands. There was sticky blood on the flat, sharp blade.

"This was the murder weapon," he said as a statement.

Both men were standing in the library, on either side of a white chalk outline drawn over the hardwood floor. There was more of the same red ooze near the outline.

Nolan, the M.E., nodded his tired head. He hated these night calls. "Went in through the back and punctured his lungs. Death occurred within minutes."

Lt. Riley tipped his brown fedora up off his wide forehead, studying the deadly steel. "Pretty mean sticker."

"It's a Bennington hunting knife," Nolan continued.

"Very popular amongst the outdoors set."

"It's his knife!" Sandy O'Malley announced loudly. She was over by the fireplace with Porter Kincaid. The middle-aged lawyer was sweating, and not from the heat.

It had been an hour since the police had been called to the scene. In the interim, Kincaid and Edgar Nyby had wisely ordered the room undisturbed. Both men had kept the frightened partygoers calm and on the premises.

Riley took charge the moment he arrived. A radio patrol had arrived first and two uniformed coppers were guarding the door to the library. The detective ordered them to get names and addresses of all the guests and then send them on their way. The less civilians under foot, the better.

In the library he discovered the body of Harlan O'Malley on the floor, his head towards the dark fireplace.

The new bride turned widow was seated in a stiff backed chair, beside which stood the lawyer. On the opposite side of the room, standing before a wall of bookshelves, were Chris and Connie O'Malley and a very nervous, dark-complexed waiter.

Having met Riley in a professional capacity, Kincaid proceeded to tell him what had transpired.

"We hadn't been in the room more than a few minutes. The waiter came in with Sandy's drink and was leaving when suddenly somebody switched off the lights. The room went black. There was a scream and the sound of somebody falling. By the time the waiter got to lights, it was over. Poor Harlan was on the floor as you see him now."

Riley chewed on his lower lip then pointed to the agitated waiter. "What's your name?"

"Carl Delmar."

"Is what Mr. Kincaid said how it happened?"

"It is." Delmar tugged at his starched collar, nervously wanting to be anywhere else. "I gave Mrs. O'Malley her highball and was heading for the door." He pointed to the light switch inches from the doorframe. "I was only a few feet away when the door suddenly opened and a hand reached in and killed the lights."

"A hand?"

"Yes, sir."

"It just reached in and flipped the switch?"

"Yes, sir. Then the door closed again. Just like that."

"And nobody came in?"

"No, sir."

"You're sure?"

Delmar walked over and positioned himself by the light switch. "I was right here when they killed the lights. If they'd have come in, they would have had to come right through me."

"Okay. What happened next?"

"Well, sir, it's just like Mr. Kincaid told you. The room was dark and then there was the yell. I reached out, fumbled and found the switch to put the lights back on."

"How long did it take you?"

"No more than five or six seconds."

Riley pulled at his chin. He slowly began to look the room over. The others remained silent, watching him. He had just knelt beside the still form of the deceased and was scrutinizing the knife when the ambulance and M.E. finally arrived.

Now an hour had elapsed. The time and cause of death had been officially documented, the body removed and the murder weapon turned over to the investigating officer. It was clear enough the murderer was one of the five people in the room at the time of the crime. Aided and abetted by an outside accomplice who had killed the lights.

But how to determine who was the guilty party? Three of the five, both women and the waiter had gloves on. But then again Chris O'Malley and Porter Kincaid could have wrapped a handkerchief around the blade handle to prevent leaving fingerprints. He had a gut hunch the weapon wouldn't help him at all.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Riley." It was Officer Chase Owens, one of the two men from the radio car.

"Yes, Owens?"

"There's a young lady outside who says she has to talk to you. She says it's vital she does so."

The detective decided it wouldn't hurt to leave his five suspects stewing a little bit longer. He followed Owens out into the main room.

"Laurel Lye!" The sight of the crime reporter made him wince. "I should have known."

"Relax, Riley, I'm here to do you a favor."

"Really? How so?"

"I've got somebody here who can solve the murder for you."

Riley had dealt with the brunette on several occasions and although she could be a pain in the butt, he respected her instincts. Lye was a good newshound.

"You do, huh?"

At this, Lye stepped aside and revealed the woman in the white tuxedo that had been standing behind her. Riley was caught flatfooted.

"Lt. Riley, meet Lady Arcane, Mistress of Magic."

"That does it!" The investigator turned to go back into the library. "I haven't got any time for this kind of nonsense."

"I assure you, it is anything but nonsense, Lieutenant," Kane said, her voice calm and emotionless.

"I believe I can unmask the killer of Harlan



## LAUREL LYE

**Star crime reporter for the Port Nocturne Eclipse,  
the city's largest daily newspaper.**

**art for Lady Arcane by Thomas Floyd**



O'Malley if you'll give me the chance."

Riley stopped in his tracks. He turned back to the two women. "And why exactly should I even consider doing that? This kind of stunt could cost me my job."

"Look, detective, Harlan O'Malley was a dear friend and I want his murderer brought to justice. That's the only motive I have in this. Nothing more."

"Okay. What kind of mumbo-jumbo are you going to do to make that happen?"

"I assure you, it is a simple enough trick. But it will work."

It was all nuts. Still the lady magician had a certain confidence that was infectious and in the end Riley decided to take a chance on her.

"Alright. We'll give it shot."

"Atta boy, Riley," Lye smiled. "You won't regret it."

"Whoa," he held up his hand. "Who said you were going anywhere? I said Lady Arcane could do her stuff. You are not part of that deal."

"That's not fair," the pretty reporter pouted angrily. "It was my idea in the first place. You can't shut me out like this!"

"She's right, Lieutenant," Kane confirmed. "It was Laurel who provided me with information that will help us apprehend the killer."

Once again he was being pushed to the wall. What was that old saying, in for a penny, in for a pound. Riley stepped up to Lye and brought his index finger up to her button nose.

"Okay, but here's how it works. You do not say a single word while you are in there! You stand in a corner and make like a statue."

"Not a problem. Really!"

"And, if this play goes bust, you give me your word you will not write one single word about it." "Huh?"

"You heard me, Lye! If your magic friend can't deliver, then the both of you make a quick exit and nobody ever hears about this. Ever!"

"Fair enough, Riley. You got a deal."

Riley put down his hand. He still had a very bad feeling about this. He opened to library door and waved the two women in.

"What's the meaning of this?" Kincaid barked the minute they entered. "What are these women doing here, Lieutenant?"

"Well, Mr. Kincaid, one of them is going to tell us who killed Mr. O'Malley."

"What!" cried Chris O'Malley. "How can she do that? She wasn't even in the room when father was stabbed."

"Maybe she's the one that killed the lights!" Sandra O'Malley accused, raising her finger at Lady Arcane.

"This is totally unorthodox," Kincaid raised his voice above the clamor the others were making. "I could have your badge for this, detective!"

"Alright!" Riley snapped, lifting his hands, palms out. "Everyone calm down or I'll throw the whole bunch of you into the slammer. Maybe you'd like to deal with all this back at the station house?"

Everyone shut up.

"Good," he continued. "That's better. I have agreed to allow this lady to do... whatever it is she's going to do. Now you'll keep quiet and do whatever it is she says."

Riley deferred to Lady Arcane. "It's all yours."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Do you have the murder weapon?"

"It's on the desk behind. But don't touch it! It hasn't been dusted for prints yet."

Kane looked down at the big hunting knife on the green cardboard blotter. "Perfect. Don't worry, Lieutenant, I've no need to touch it. At least not with my hands."

The white clad trickster began walking around the desk slowly. "Every weapon used in committing an act of violence stores up negative energy that is directly related to the person who used it."

She stopped behind the padded chair, then pulled it away from the desk. She looked at her attentive audience. "I would like all of you who were in the room with Mr. O'Malley, to come and stand around the desk."

"This is crazy!" Chris argued.

"You heard the lady," Riley said, his face stern. "Everybody get up and around the desk."

Reluctantly Chris and his sister moved forward to take up places in front of the big desk. The waiter, Delmar, shuffled over to stand on the right side. Kincaid offered his arm to Sandy and she joined him on the left. Riley and Laurel Lye stood back along the fireplace, out of their way.

"Good," Lady Arcane readied herself. "Now, by the use of my mystic powers, I will command the blade to show the last person to handle it."

The redhead bowed her head slightly, brought her hands out over the stained knife and began to slowly move them in a graceful pattern.

"Forces of darkness and light," she intoned. "Hear my cry and raise this instrument of death. Raise it up and show us the killer."

Suddenly the hunting tool began to move as if someone was shaking the table beneath it. Then it started to float upwards into the air. Connie O'Malley gasped, her eyes almost bugging out of their sockets. Now there was utter silence in the room, save for the ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the back corner.

With her head still lowered, Lady Arcane kept speaking her ritualistic chant. "Show us the killer,

spirits of darkness and light. Let this foul weapon point the way to that black heart."

The sharp steel, floating only inches from her hands, began to spin. Very slowly it made a revolution, its tip moving towards each of the six people assembled around the desk. When it was facing the magician, she lifted her head and opened her eyes to startling effect.

"Now, blade of death, show us the killer of Harlan O'Malley! Now, go and reveal him to us! I command you!"

The knife continued to spin gaining more and more speed with each new revolution. Then, abruptly it stopped and froze with its tip pointing at the waiter, Carl Delmar.

"There is your killer!" Lady Arcane proclaimed. "He killed Harlan O'Malley."

"I didn't do it!" Delmar yelled, sweat beading his round, frightened face. "I swear, I didn't do it!"

"The mystic powers never lie! The blade is pointing at you!"

Delmar stepped forward and shook his head. "No. It's wrong, I tell you. It wasn't me! It was..."

BLAM!

The bullet hit Delmar's throat and ripped it open. His face registered shock as his hands feebly clutched at his windpipe in a vain attempt to staunch the crimson flow.

Then he collapsed to the floor, dead.

"Don't anyone move or they'll be next!" Connie O'Malley, brandishing a small, four-barrel .22 derringer, backed away from the others. She kept moving the gun back and forth to keep them all covered.

The door burst open and Patrolman Owens started to rush in. Connie fired a shot that hit the wall inches from his head and he retreated instantly.

"Tell them to stay out!" she ordered Riley.

Riley cupped his hand around his mouth. "Owens. Keep everybody out. No one is to come in. Is that clear?"

A few seconds passed then Owens's muffled reply came back, "Okay, Lieutenant. We'll wait for your word."

"Connie! What the hell is this?" Chris was totally confused and fumbling with his words. "What are you doing?"

"I believe the term is murder," Lady Arcane supplied.

"That's right," Connie confessed, her look one of a caged animal with nowhere to run. "That spineless bastard was about to sell me out. I had to shut him up."

"What? Are you saying... you killed dad?"

"You catch on pretty quick, big brother. Of course I killed him."

"But why? I don't understand?"

"I think the fact that Carl Delmar was a two-bit gambler might have something to do with it, Mr. O'Malley."

"You're pretty smart, aren't you Lady Arcane," Connie's face became a cruel sneer. "Think you got it all figured out, do you?"

"Not really," the magician conceded. "I simply suggested a possible connection. My guess would be you liked to gamble and lost more than you could afford to pay."

"Bingo. Carl was my bookie. When my debts started to climb, he got scared that some of the big boys in the city were going to come down on us hard."

"But why didn't you come to me?" Chris asked. "I would have helped you out?"

Connie shook her head and pointed her small gun towards Sandy. "With what, Chris? The old man was getting ready to cut us out of his will. All because of this gold-digging bitch."

Lt. Riley started to take a step forward and the frantic woman turned on him. "Don't! I've still got two shots left!"

"What are you going to do, Miss O'Malley? You know I can't let you leave."

Connie's head jerked back and forth, eyeing everyone in the room as if she were seeing them all for the first time. Then her gaze settled on Sandra O'Malley who was clutching Kincaid's arm for support.

"Maybe so, Lieutenant. But I'm going to send this bitch to hell first."

"Don't let her shoot me!" Sandy cried out and buried her head in Kincaid's chest as Connie approached her.

Riley was helpless. He'd never have time to pull his own piece before the dame fired. The body count was about to go up one.

Connie aimed her pistol at the back of Sandy's head.

Lady Arcane wove her hands at the still floating knife and then swept them towards Connie. The knife took off like a bird in flight, tumbling end over end and slammed into the woman's hand just as she was squeezing the trigger.

"OW!" The knife's blade hit her wrist and the gun fired low, the bullet striking the corner of the desk.

As Connie stumbled backwards, Riley closed the space between them and smoothly yanked the derringer out of her injured hand. Then he calmly pulled his handcuffs from his coat and bagged his prey.

"Connie O'Malley, you are under arrest for the murder of Harlan O'Malley and Carl Delmar."

Within minutes the crestfallen murderess was

escorted out of the room by officer Owens and his partner. Tears streamed down her lovely cheeks as she walked past her brother. Chris watched her go and then fell back against his father's desk emotionally drained.

"Are you okay?" Laurel Lye asked, moving up to him, her notepad and pencil once again ready to jot down quotes and statements.

He looked up at her dazed and confused, then shook his head. "Look, I'm not up to any of this right now. Lieutenant?"

Riley, standing beside Lady Arcane sympathized with the young man. He had just witnessed the brutal slaying of his father and now the apprehension of his sister, the killer. The top cop was not without a heart.

"You can all go," he also indicated Kincaid and Mrs. O'Malley. "But I'd appreciate it if you stopped by the station tomorrow to give us your statements."

The trio agreed to comply with his wishes and then filed out of the library.

Lye went to join the cop and the magician.

"What a story."

"Yeah," Riley took off his fedora and mopped his brow with the back of his hand.

"Something is still troubling you, Lieutenant?" Lady Arcane could see the question in his grimace.

"Well, yes. Exactly how is it you knew to make your play at Delmar? Did you really believe he was the killer?"

"I wasn't sure, but you'll recall I told you Laurel had provided me with some information."

"That's right, you did."

"I recognized Delmar," Lye provided happily. "Earlier in the evening when he went to get Sandy a drink. So I asked myself what a cheap hood was doing here posing as a fancy waiter. When the murder happened, I told Arlene about him and she thought it was important enough to make this play."

Riley wasn't totally satisfied. "But still, that seemed very little to go on, Miss Kane?"

"Sometimes, Lieutenant, you have to consider all your facts."

"Such as?"

"It was Connie who actually suggested they all move their discussion to a private room."

"Right. But it was Mrs. O'Malley who chose the library and then asked Delmar to bring her a drink."

"Which became a moment of opportunity," Kane elaborated. "Didn't Delmar tell you he saw a hand come in and kill the light switch?"

"He did."

"Then think about it. What he was telling you

was actually the scheme he and Miss O'Malley had worked out earlier. Whichever room she and the others went off to, Delmar would wait a few minutes and then come over and slide his hand in to darken the room.

"When Sandra altered things by asking for a drink, he decided to improvise on the spot and complete the same act, only from the inside. Then he told you his story."

"Okay. That makes sense. But it still didn't point to Connie. He could have just as easily been in cahoots with any of them in that room for who knows what other motives."

"Ha," the redheaded beauty laughed. "Exactly. Which is why I merely proceeded with the lessons of logic taught to me by my teachers long ago."

"Meaning?"

"The only true fact I had was that Carl Delmar was there under false pretense. Knowing that one truth, I manipulated the knife to push him, knowing he would most likely betray his cohort rather than take the rap."

"And luckily it worked."

Riley grinned. He liked this Lady Arcane and the way she thought. "You know, you ever get tired of the hocus-pocus business, give me a call. We could use a sharp thinker like you on the force."

"Why thank you, Lieutenant. Still, I think I'll stick to magic."

"Oh?"

"It's safer." ☞



ON NO! THE  
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HAS THE DROP  
ON ARCH-FIEND  
DOCTOR SATAN!!  
WILL THE  
RED-ROBED  
GENIUS OF  
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TO COMMIT  
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*That little ball may say sixteen red, but my pistol says black thirty-seven.*

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